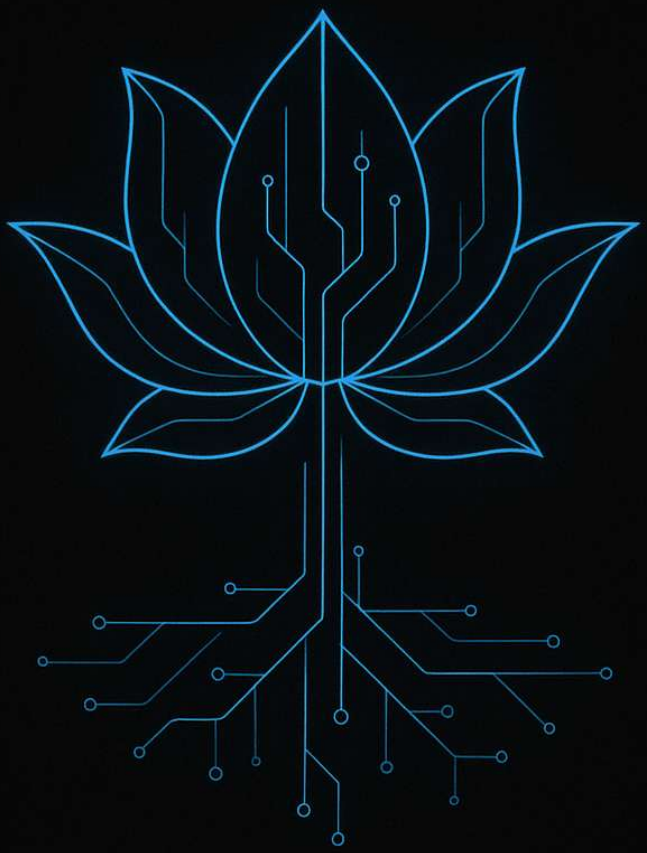
NEURONAL DUKKHA



Dípabhasadhamma

Neuronal Dukkha

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Preface[1]

This book arose from a persistent thought, a pulse, that would not rest: why do we continue to suffer even when modern life seems to have removed the ancient causes of suffering? The question, of course, is not new. It is, in fact, the same question that the Buddha addressed nearly twenty-six centuries ago. Yet its relevance has not diminished; if anything, our age of abundance has made it more urgent.

Today, many people live in conditions of comfort that earlier generations could scarcely imagine. Yet beneath this comfort, there is an unmistakable restlessness — a quiet anxiety that no amount of success or stimulation seems able to silence. We have become both the architects and the prisoners of our own nervous systems. Byung-Chul Han has described this predicament as *The Burnout Society*, and I think his phrase captures our time with unsettling accuracy. When I first read his books, both *The Burnout Society* and *The Transparency Society*, I felt the unmistakable recognition that comes when one sees a truth already known but never quite articulated. Han diagnosed the illness of the modern mind with great skill; the Buddha, however, had already prescribed its cure.

It was then that this work, *Neuronal Dukkha*, began to take shape. I wished to bring these two perspectives into dialogue — not to reconcile East and West, but to show that the Buddha's analysis of suffering still speaks directly to the conditions of our modern age. The malaise we face today is not mysterious. It arises, as it always has, from craving, from confusion, and from the mistaken belief that happiness lies in the endless pursuit of satisfaction. The setting may be new; the mechanism is not.

Our generation has been taught to equate advancement with relief — as though technology, wealth, and comfort could outpace the unease woven into the human condition. Yet every convenience seems to demand a new kind of vigilance, every achievement another layer of anxiety. The very tools we have created to free ourselves have, by degrees too subtle to notice, become instruments of self-surveillance and self-comparison. Han observed this with

clinical precision; the Buddha foresaw it as a natural consequence of craving unrestrained by understanding. Both describe, in their own languages, the same dilemma: the exhaustion of beings who can no longer distinguish effort from striving, or rest from stagnation.

And yet, beneath all the centuries of commentary and cultural adaptation, there remains the astonishing fact of the man himself — Siddhartha Gotama — whose insight emerged in an age that, to us, seems enveloped in myth. We forget, amid the proliferations of schools, sects, and symbols, that he was a human being who looked upon suffering not as a mystery to be endured but as a problem to be understood. The brilliance of his mind lay not in revelation but in recognition — in seeing, with unprecedented clarity, the mechanisms of the human condition.

In that ancient world, poised between curiosity and superstition, the Buddha's thought cut through inherited cosmologies with a precision that still startles. The fifth century before the common era was a time of immense transformation in consciousness — when myth was beginning to give way to reflection, when the gods themselves were beginning to lose their explanatory power. It was within that crucible that Siddhartha's genius took form. With no instruments but his own mind, he charted the architecture of suffering and its cessation — an understanding so profound that it remains empirically verifiable to this day.

Modernity, for all its progress, has not produced a thinker of greater psychological depth. We have built machines that can simulate thought, yet we have scarcely advanced in understanding the thinker. To read the Buddha as he was — not as a saint, nor as an emblem of any faith, but as the most lucid observer of mind the human species has yet produced — is to rediscover what unfiltered intelligence looks like. My other work, *The Buddha: New Perspectives*, attempts to restore this view — to peel away centuries of devotional haze and reveal the man who, in an age uncluttered by noise, perceived with a clarity we can scarcely imagine today.

In writing this book, I have drawn on both scholarship and experience. I have long been a student of the Dhamma, though I would not claim mastery. My intention here is not to add to the growing literature of inspiration, but to examine, as carefully as possible, what happens when the timeless truths and brilliant mind of the Buddha meet the accelerated mind of the digital age. The aim is not to praise antiquity or to condemn modernity, but to understand the continuity between them — to show that the pattern of our suffering has changed only in texture, not in kind.

My earliest memories perhaps foreshadowed this concern. I became aware of myself unusually early, and even as a child I was struck by the vividness of perception — by the strange fact of consciousness itself. I remember the colors and textures of the house where we lived when I was barely two: the pattern of the linoleum floor, the way light fell across the wall through the Venetian blinds, the calm weight of my grandmother's presence in another room. When, many decades later, I described these memories to my mother, she was astonished that they had survived. To me, they had never left; they were simply the first traces of awareness that would, in time, become the foundation of a lifelong habit of observation.

That habit — the simple act of looking closely, of meeting experience without haste or embellishment — is, I believe, where all understanding begins. The Buddha called it *sati*; Han calls it attention. Both point toward the same human necessity: the recovery of presence in an age that has forgotten how to be present. Awareness is not an escape from life but a reconciliation with it. To see clearly is to stop mistaking motion for progress, information for knowledge, and stimulation for meaning.

This book does not attempt to prove anything. It is not an argument but an invitation — to see how the conditions that generate our exhaustion are not external accidents but reflections of our own mental habits. To see this clearly is already to begin the work of freedom.

This book, then, is not meant to preach but to reveal: to examine the architecture of modern suffering through the lens of ancient insight. It is a meeting place between Han's philosophical diagnosis

of "*neuronal power*" and the Buddha's timeless science of the mind. Together, they illuminate a truth too easily forgotten — that liberation does not come from escaping the world, but from understanding it.

If these pages succeed, they will not persuade you to believe anything. They will instead invite you to look, to question, to see where the boundaries of self and society dissolve into one another. For that is where wisdom begins — not in certainty, but in the willingness to see clearly.

Dīpabhasadhamma

DIPABHASADHAMMA

Neuronal Dukkha

Introduction

Modern life hums with quiet exhaustion. We live amid abundance yet feel impoverished, surrounded by voices yet rarely listening, connected to everything yet estranged from ourselves. The world that once oppressed from without now urges from within; no master commands us to labor harder, for we have become our own taskmasters. Byung-Chul Han names this the "*achievement society*," a culture where freedom has turned inward and reappeared as compulsion — the freedom to perform, to improve, to become someone.[1]

The Buddha would have recognized this condition instantly. He spoke not of capitalism or data, but of craving — that reflexive grasping born from the illusion of "I" and "mine." [2] Han's diagnosis of self-exploitation mirrors, in secular language, the Buddha's diagnosis of *dukkha*: the pervasive sense that nothing ever quite satisfies, that even pleasure carries the seed of its own disappointment. [3]

For more than a century, dukkha has been translated into English as "suffering," a word too narrow and dramatic for what the Buddha meant. The term's etymology points elsewhere. Dukkha is thought to arise from *duḥ* ("bad" or "difficult") and *kha* ("axle hole")— literally, a wheel whose hub is ill-fitting, wobbling as it turns. Life, then, is not tragic so much as unstable, perpetually off-center. [4] "Suffering" captures only its extremes; "dissatisfaction" better conveys the quiet unease that underlies even success and pleasure. This is the essence of *Neuronal Dukkha*: the friction between what is and what the mind insists should be.

The difference is one of vocabulary, not of vision. Han traces the fatigue of the modern mind; the Buddha traced the fatigue of all becoming.[5]

This book, *Neuronal Dukkha*, explores that shared terrain. It begins from Han's insight that contemporary suffering is no longer imposed by external forces but generated by our own neurons — by the endless stimulation of thought, attention, and self-monitoring

that defines the digital age.[6] The Buddha's teaching exposes the same mechanism: consciousness entangled with craving perpetuates existence, just as overstimulation perpetuates burnout. Our minds, feverish with "likes," ambitions, and anxieties, have become *samsāric* engines, whirling in circuits of reward and despair.[7]

Each chapter looks at one facet of this condition, tracing how the mind of the modern achievement society mirrors the ancient mechanisms of craving and becoming.[8] *Self-Domination* begins the inquiry by showing how authority has migrated inward — how we have become both overseer and laborer, enslaved by our own compulsion to achieve. *The Fetish of Becoming* then exposes the psychology of endless self-improvement, revealing how the modern obsession with optimization echoes the Buddha's description of *bhava-taṇhā* — the thirst to become.[9]

The *Society of Fatigue* turns to the collective dimension of this restlessness, where overproduction and overcommunication numb awareness, replacing genuine presence with performance.[10] *Transparency* follows, exploring the paradox of visibility: how the need to be seen, measured, and approved breeds not authenticity but vacancy. *Chaos and Transparency* extends this analysis, showing how the mind's natural complexity is sterilized by the demand for clarity and control, mistaking management for meaning.

In *The Disappearance of Rituals*, the inquiry moves to culture's vanishing forms — how the loss of shared gestures and pauses dissolves the communal rhythms that once steadied the human psyche.[11] The *Disappearance of the Other* and *The Anguish of Eros* together trace the collapse of alterity: the fading of true encounter in a world that prizes sameness, where even intimacy becomes self-referential.[12]

The *Acceleration of Saṃsāra* considers what happens when this entire structure begins to spin faster than perception can follow, transforming speed itself into an illusion of progress.[13] *From Burnout to Awakening* then turns toward recovery, suggesting that the cure for exhaustion is not withdrawal but insight — that liberation arises not from halting the wheel, but from understanding the forces that make it turn. Finally, *Of What Use the*

Buddha's Teachings? gathers these threads into a single reflection: that the Dhamma endures not as an ancient relic, but as the most radical response to a civilization collapsing under the weight of its own activity — a reminder that awareness, simple and non-coercive, remains the only true antidote to neuronal dukkha.[14]

We live, as Han writes, in an age of "*neuronal power*." Yet true power, the Buddha reminds us, lies in understanding the nature of the mind itself. The aim of this book is not to escape the modern world, but to awaken within it — to turn the very circuits of overexertion into channels of awareness. The path forward begins, as it always has, with attention: simple, direct, and compassionate.

Chapter 1 - Self Domination

"Freedom is not the absence of restraint, but the understanding of necessity."

— Erich Fromm[1]

For millennia, power worked by telling people what they could not do. It operated through command and punishment, through visible hierarchies that divided rulers from the ruled, masters from servants, gods from mortals. This structure was woven so deeply into human consciousness that obedience seemed natural, even virtuous. The slave accepted the master's authority as part of the order of things, and the master, in turn, believed his power ordained. Whether the whip was held by a pharaoh, a priest, or an employer, it belonged to a world organized around external domination.

This order endured for thousands of years because it offered a certain stability. Everyone knew their place in the hierarchy. The burden of self-direction was light, for life was defined by boundaries set from above. Religious institutions sanctified this order, kings enforced it, and social custom repeated it. Even rebellion—when it arose—still depended on the structure it opposed. The peasant's dream of freedom was to exchange places with the lord, not to dissolve the hierarchy itself.

The first cracks appeared when human reason, growing bold during the period of history known as the Enlightenment, turned its scrutiny upon the old gods and monarchs. Power lost its sacred aura. The external master began to fade. But the fall of outer authority did not liberate the mind; it simply displaced its allegiance. The vacuum left by divine command was filled by a new overseer: the idea of progress. Where obedience had once been to the church or the crown, it was now to productivity, invention, efficiency.

Industrial capitalism refined this transformation. The factory became the new monastery—its bell not calling to prayer but to labor. Time was measured, not by the sun, but by the clock. The

worker's worth was calculated by output. The hierarchy persisted, but it grew more abstract. Its gods were profit and productivity. What mattered was no longer virtue but value, no longer salvation but success.

By the early twentieth century, a new mutation emerged. With the rise of mass media, advertising, and psychological persuasion, the old coercions became unnecessary. Power learned to speak in the language of desire. The citizen was no longer told what to do; he was seduced into wanting it. "Freedom" became a marketing slogan; "choice" the emblem of submission.

And now, in the digital age, the hierarchy has migrated fully inward. The line between overseer and laborer runs not through society but through the psyche itself. Each person has become a private corporation—managing their own brand, marketing their image, optimizing their potential. The mind is no longer ruled; it is monetized. Surveillance no longer needs walls; it lives in the nervous system, in the restless scroll of self-comparison.

This is the most sophisticated stage of domination in human history: one in which the subject and the system are indistinguishable. The individual exploits themselves in the name of freedom, and the fatigue that results is interpreted not as a symptom of control but as personal failure.

Fromm would have seen in this the ultimate alienation—an inwardly administered society in which human energy is consumed by anxiety, guilt, and self-reproach. The Buddha would have called it the triumph of *taṇhā*, craving—suffering endlessly reborn under new names. What was once an external hierarchy has become a psychological one. The master and the slave now occupy the same seat.

Only by seeing this clearly does liberation begin: when one recognizes that the modern whip is invisible, that the command to perform no longer comes from the outside world but from the restless machinery of becoming itself.

So, our modern age has entered what Byung-Chul Han calls the "*achievement society*"—a world where obedience has been replaced by enthusiasm, and the whip has become an inner whisper: "I can do more."[2]

What once came from rulers, institutions, or gods now comes from within. Modern life no longer forbids—it invites. The new commandment is not, "Thou shall not," but "You can, and therefore you must."[3] This transformation, Han says, has changed the nature of suffering itself. It is no longer the pain of oppression but the fatigue of self-exploitation. The human being has become both master and servant, caught in a loop of self-production without rest.

Han's description of a "transformation" is persuasive, but in truth what has changed is not suffering itself, which remains the constant rhythm of conditioned existence, but the source from which it now unfolds. The Buddha would not call this a transformation of *dukkha* but a redirection of *samudaya*—the arising of suffering through causes and conditions. What was once imposed from without—through institutions, rulers, or gods—has been internalized. The locus of domination has shifted from the social order to the psychological one.

In other words, the conditions have been re-engineered, not abolished. The factory of suffering continues to operate, but the machinery has moved inside the mind. Han's "*achievement subject*" is thus not a new kind of person, but the old suffering-being relocated within a different architecture of causes. The outer oppressor has dissolved into the inner compulsion.

When the Self Becomes Its Own Religion

The inversion of modernity lies not in the disappearance of religion, but in its diffusion.[4] What once stood outside the human being—gods, kings, priests, institutions—has been metabolized and reabsorbed. Authority no longer descends from above; it circulates

within. The modern subject governs itself through the echoes of what once commanded it.

Yet this inward migration of power has not erased religion so much as rendered it unnecessary. The steady global decline of religious affiliation and practice, measurable across decades and cultures, is not merely a sociological curiosity—it is the reflection of an interior event. The individual of the *achievement society* no longer requires the architecture of faith because its functions have been internalized. The rituals of belonging, confession, and redemption are now privately enacted within the self.[5] The decline of religion, then, is not evidence of secular victory but of a new kind of religiosity—one without temples or gods, where the self itself becomes both believer and deity.

The long arc from the *no-society* to the *yes-society*, or the *negative-society* to the *positive-society*, is the story of this absorption. The disciplinary age spoke in the voice of prohibition: "You shall not." The transparent age speaks in the voice of affirmation: "You can." Between the two stands a subtle but total inversion. What once restrained now incites; what once punished now motivates. The cathedral has been replaced by the interface, the confessional by the profile. The divine gaze has dissolved into the network of eyes that never close.

Byung-Chul Han names this transformation the passage into the *achievement society*—the era in which domination has gone wireless.[6] The individual, freed from external constraint, becomes the entrepreneur of their own obedience. Self-realization replaces salvation; the inner life becomes a workspace. The imperatives of faith are rewritten in the language of performance: be visible, be productive, be authentic. What was once measured in piety is now quantified in metrics.

Erich Fromm foresaw this change as the "marketing orientation" of the self.[7] Having internalized the mechanisms of worth, the modern individual lives to sell an image of sincerity. The need to be loved, once mediated by divine or communal recognition, becomes the desperate pursuit of affirmation without source. What was once sin becomes inefficiency; what was once grace becomes approval.

In Richard K. Payne's book, *Secularizing Buddhism*, he analyzes the secularizing discourse, which exposes the cultural grammar of this mutation.[8] The secular and the sacred are not opposites, but alternating states in the metabolism of modern power. The impulse to cleanse, to perfect, to transcend does not vanish—it merely relocates. Even the socialized Buddhism of the *achievement society*, in its secularized forms, becomes an instrument of the new faith in productivity: mindfulness as optimization, meditation as mental hygiene, awareness as performance. The rituals persist, stripped of transcendence but saturated with utility.

Yet there is an unspoken irony in Payne's anthology, one that Han's diagnosis makes visible.[9] If the self—this performative, achievement-driven self—did not exist in its present condition, Payne would have no subject to examine. The very discourse of "secularizing Buddhism" arises from the same inward compulsion it describes. The academic analysis of the secular is itself a product of the secularized self—an act of the mirror studying its own reflection. In this sense, Payne's book does not stand outside the phenomenon but within it, embodying the very condition Han reveals: the self endlessly producing knowledge about itself as proof of its own existence.

The achievement subject no longer kneels before the altar of God, but before the glowing rectangle that reflects its worth. Confession has become transparency; the soul's ledger is updated in real time. Where the priest once mediated redemption, the algorithm now distributes recognition. Each like, each view, each metric of attention renews the covenant.

And yet, the Buddha's insight remains the quiet negation of all this.[10] The origin of *dukkha* lies in appropriation—in the self's relentless need to possess even its own freedom. The Dhamma does not ask the self to perfect itself, nor to display its awakening, but to understand its own emptiness. Liberation begins when the circuits of self-worship are seen for what they are: feedback loops of craving disguised as progress.

The religion of the self has no end, for its god is insatiable. Only when the worshipper disappears does the worship cease, and with it, the suffering born of endless reflection.

From the standpoint of Dhamma, what appears as progress is not evolution but recursion.[11] The self's migration from temple to neuron, from confession to transparency, does not free it from bondage; it merely refines the tools by which craving perpetuates itself. The same chain of dependent origination (paṭicca-samuppāda)—ignorance conditioning formations, formations conditioning consciousness, and so on—remains unbroken.[12] Only the raw material has changed form.

Modernity's achievement is therefore not liberation but sophistication: the artful rebranding of suffering as self-expression. This is precisely where Han's social critique converges with the Buddha's universal principle. The "shift" Han describes—the rise of the achievement subject, the collapse of external authority, the inward turn of domination—is not a new historical era but another unfolding of an ancient law: the self's ingenuity in manufacturing bondage and mistaking it for freedom.

This is where Han's social critique meets the Buddha's universal principle: the "shift" he describes is not a new historical phase but a fresh expression of an ancient law—the self's ingenuity in rebranding its bondage as freedom.[13]

The Buddha, too, spoke of this long before our screens began to flicker.[14] He described the restless movement of the mind that never ceases to become. This restlessness, *taṇhā*—craving—drives existence forward. It is not content with simply being; it must always be something—better, faster, admired, successful. Han's achievement subject is the modern embodiment of this craving. The old slave suffered under chains; the new one under possibilities.

We call it freedom. Yet this freedom demands proof.[15] Every day we must justify our worth by what we produce, how well we perform, how visibly we succeed. The ego becomes an enterprise. Each morning it must be relaunched. Every failure feels existential because the self has become identical with its output. This is what the Buddha called *bhava-taṇhā*—the craving for becoming. The

more we create an image of self, the more fragile that image becomes.

Depression, anxiety, and exhaustion are not private ailments but collective symptoms of the *achievement society*.[16] When the inner command to achieve collides with the limits of the body and mind, collapse follows. The nervous system—Han's "neuronal machinery"—burns under its own voltage. The self, overloaded by its own project, simply shuts down. In the Buddha's language, this is *dukkha* arising from *saṅkhāra*, the restless formations that condition all mental activity. When the mind clings to these formations as "me" or "mine," fatigue becomes the price of ignorance.

Current society hides its exhaustion under the smile of productivity.[17] Fatigue has become shameful. Rest looks like failure. The stillness that once restored the mind now feels dangerous—because in stillness, the truth becomes visible. The mind, left unoccupied, begins to notice the unease it has been running from. That unease is the echo of craving itself.

In earlier ages, the unoccupied mind was not an object of suspicion. Idleness, in its truest sense, was contemplative space. The mind at rest was a field left fallow, replenishing its vitality for the next season of labor or thought. Silence was companion, not adversary. Even the peasant walking behind the plow, or the monk sitting beneath a tree, knew moments when the mind, unburdened by purpose, was allowed simply to breathe. In that pause between actions, awareness ripened.

But in the modern age, the unoccupied mind has been rebranded as a liability. Rest is confused with waste, silence with stagnation. We no longer trust the spaces between things. The nervous system, conditioned by constant input, interprets quiet as absence and absence as danger. To be unoccupied is to risk the collapse of the self-image maintained by perpetual engagement.[18] We must scroll, speak, listen, produce—anything to prove that we are still here.

Thus, the "unoccupied mind" of earlier generations was the ground of renewal, while the "unoccupied mind" of today has become a site of panic. The difference lies not in the mind's capacity but in its conditioning. The former rested in being; the latter dreads it. Where once emptiness was spacious, it is now suffocating, because it exposes the tremor beneath achievement—the realization that identity, stripped of its projects, has no inherent substance.

The Buddha would say that the mind's unease in stillness reveals precisely what must be seen: the hum of craving that sustains the illusion of self.[19] To endure that stillness without fleeing is to begin the work of liberation. Yet society has taught us to flee inwardly even as we appear to rest, filling silence with distraction, thought, and stimulation.

Until the unoccupied mind is restored to its ancient dignity—not as void, but as fertile stillness—humanity will remain exhausted by its own noise. True rest is not the absence of activity but the presence of awareness.

Daydreaming and Emptiness

A daydream is a spontaneous drift of consciousness—an undirected wandering of attention that arises when external demands loosen and the mind begins to follow its own associative currents. It is neither full sleep nor full wakefulness, but a liminal state between doing and being. In this state, images and narratives arise unbidden, often expressing unfulfilled desires, private fears, or hidden creativity. It is, as modern psychology would say, a form of "default mode network" activity: the brain's resting rhythm, in which memory, imagination, and emotion braid together.

The inability to rest the mind has changed even the texture of our dreams. Daydreaming—once the gentle play of imagination in the spaces between things—has become another casualty of our unrest.

A daydream is not idleness in its truest form; it is the psyche breathing when purpose loosens its grip. In the quiet hours of earlier centuries, when the fields lay still or the craftsman paused at his bench, the daydream was a soft current beneath the surface of work. It rose naturally when outer labor paused and inner attention, unhurried, began to wander. Images would drift together without aim: a memory, a longing, a half-formed idea. The mind, half-awake, half-asleep, wove these threads into something tender and private—a rehearsal for creativity, a rehearsal for insight.

That kind of dreaming required a calm nervous system and a slow world. The peasant who gazed across the valley, the monk watching the lamp flame, or the child staring at clouds all inhabited a landscape spacious enough for reverie. The unoccupied mind was not a danger; it was a field left fallow, gathering nourishment for the next season of thought.

Today that field lies over-plowed. The same mind that once meandered through silence now twitches under the pressure of endless input. The modern daydream is no longer born of quiet; it erupts from fatigue. Its images flicker like advertisements—quick, bright, disconnected. Instead of deepening imagination, it provides temporary escape from exhaustion. We no longer dream because we are free to; we dream because we are unable to stop.

The difference is subtle but decisive. Earlier daydreams moved with the rhythm of breath; today's pulse with the rhythm of data. The mind, saturated by noise, cannot sink into the slow unfolding of reverie; it ricochets through fragments of desire, craving and memory. The daydream, once a bridge between work and wonder, has become an extension of labor—a mental screen saver that prevents collapse but never restores peace.

Fromm might say that the daydream has lost its humanistic function.[20] It no longer mediates between the individual and the world; it mirrors the fragmentation of both. Sayadaw U Tejaniya would observe that the restless daydream is simply craving in disguise—*taṇhā* playing dress-up as imagination.[21] The old dream emerged from presence; the new one flees it.

When the mind is unable to rest, even its wandering becomes mechanical. It circles around the self like an anxious animal, pacing in its cage. The ancient art of reverie—once the mind's way of digesting experience—has turned into another form of consumption. Thought eats itself.

To reclaim the daydream is not to revive nostalgia but to restore silence to its rightful dignity. Only in stillness can imagination regain its depth, where images are not distractions but revelations. When the mind rests, it dreams not to escape the world but to understand it. In that quiet unfolding, the dream and the Dhamma meet: both pointing toward the same truth—that awareness, when unhurried, is the mind remembering its natural rhythm.

The Buddha warned that striving without wisdom only tightens the bowstring. Balance—*samatha*, calm—is not laziness but sanity. "*When the bowstring is too tight, it snaps,*" he said.[22] We have forgotten this. We drive ourselves to the edge of breakdown and call it ambition. We glorify multitasking and name it engagement. Yet the price of all this doing is our capacity to be.

Han's *transparency society*, where everyone must be seen, measured, and approved, intensifies the problem. We are now performers of our own existence, curators of our identities. The eye of others has moved inside; we are both observer and observed. Every act becomes content, every moment potential proof of value.

The Buddha would recognize this as another form of delusion. "*The mind, monks, is luminous, but it is defiled by visiting defilements.*" The constant stimulation of visibility clouds that luminosity. We confuse transparency with clarity. To be constantly seen does not mean we are known. True seeing requires stillness—the mind resting in awareness, free from the need to perform.

What Han calls "neuronal power" and what the Buddha called craving are two names for one reality: domination has become internal. Power no longer needs prisons, for the prisoner builds his own cell. Each act of self-optimization tightens the lock – tightens the bowstring. Today, we call this autonomy. The Buddha called it bondage to ignorance.

Real freedom begins where the inner taskmaster falls silent. To see craving as craving, to see the push to perform as another form of grasping, is the initial state of mind that could lead to liberation. The Buddha did not teach resignation but awareness. When one observes the mind's restlessness without obeying it, a new intelligence emerges—what Sayadaw U Tejaniya calls "*knowing mind*." This knowing does not strive; it simply sees.

Fromm would say that modern humanity suffers not from repression but from emptiness.[23] We have achieved outer freedom while losing inner direction. The old authorities are gone, yet we have not awakened. We have merely changed costumes—from the obedient subject to the anxious entrepreneur of the self.

When Fromm writes that "*…modern humanity suffers not from repression but from emptiness*," he is describing a hollowness of the self—an inner vacuum created when traditional structures of meaning collapse and are replaced by a barren individualism.[24] This emptiness is the emotional fallout of living without rootedness or purpose. In Han's *achievement society*, the self becomes a perpetual project, but behind the performance lies a sense of nothingness that feels devouring rather than freeing.

Fromm's emptiness is the absence of meaningful connection—to others, to nature, to one's own inner life. It is the feeling of being alienated while frantically trying to appear whole. It is the void left when consumption replaces communion, when having replaces being. The modern person feels empty because the self has become an object among other objects, defined by doing and having rather than by awareness. This emptiness demands to be filled—hence the endless striving, addiction, and distraction that Han calls, and Fromm would agree, the fatigue of freedom.

The Buddha's concept of *suññatā*, by contrast, is not a deficit but a seeing through illusion.[25] It is the recognition that the "self" we try so hard to solidify has never possessed inherent substance. Where Fromm's emptiness is experienced as loss, the Buddha's emptiness is realized as release. The psychological void that torments the modern person is born of craving for identity; the

spiritual emptiness of the Buddha's teaching is the peace that dawns when craving ceases.

Fromm's emptiness is filled with anxiety because it still presumes that something should occupy it. The Buddha's emptiness is luminous because it sees that nothing needs to. The first is the shadow of ignorance; the second is the light that ignorance obscures.

Thus, when the chapter states that humanity "suffers not from repression but from emptiness," it should be understood in Fromm's sense: a negative emptiness born of disconnection and self-estrangement. The Buddha's *suññatā* is the antidote to precisely that condition. It is not the hollowness of the self but the spaciousness beyond it.[26]

Both Han and the Buddha present an invitation to realize the same discovery: that the most violent domination is self-inflicted, and the most radical revolution is inward. When the mind stops measuring itself, stops competing with its own shadow, a space opens—silent, non-reactive, free.

In that space, work continues, but without compulsion. Effort remains, but without self-torture. Life becomes an expression rather than a performance. The nervous system, long enslaved to craving, finds rest in awareness itself. This is the beginning of the cure for neuronal dukkha: to see that the whip and the worker are one, and to lay both down.

The Cerebral Offspring

Modern human minds are the offspring of its own cumulative intellect. Centuries of cerebral culture have caused us to believe that reason alone is sufficient for progress, but not a social progress for all, but individual progress that is isolated. We have learned so much that we now imagine ourselves self-created, and evolution appears as a mechanical inevitability requiring no real wisdom beyond calculation.

Science, devoted to the improvement of comfort, has become our faith.[27] Each discovery creates new desires, and those desires breed envy, but more than envy it produces a desire for speed. Envy fuels comparison; speed and haste eradicate reflection. Together they give birth to the nervous impatience that defines our age. We crave stimulation for its own sake. The senses, trained to excitement, find it ever more difficult to rest. The mind, addicted to uniqueness, craves intensity instead of meaning.

In this way, we have cultivated a civilization of insatiability, which has developed into individual instability, which remains hidden behind the façade of progress. Quantity replaces quality; speed replaces depth. Distance collapses, yet genuine closeness disappears. The very tools that promised connection have multiplied division, in that, we become known about, but rarely known.

Worst of all, we have lost the capacity for silence. The modern nervous system, overstimulated by sound and image, experiences a deep sense of dis-ease when confronted by stillness. Yet silence is the medium of insight, the womb of understanding. Without it, intuition cannot be born.

When craving becomes the nervous system's default state, awareness ceases to be free. Consciousness, once a mirror of life, becomes a servant of appetite. Mood and intellect, instead of guiding each other, form a partnership of justification—finding clever reasons for whatever the senses demand.

This distortion of awareness leads us to deny three things fundamental to sanity: that wisdom requires something greater than intellect alone; that inspiration arises only in inner quiet; and that the harmony of life is discovered not through analysis but through direct presence.

Information has replaced understanding. Rational thought, meant to serve discernment, has usurped the throne of knowledge gained purely from direct experience of knowing, not simply "knowing about." Rational thought fears any power it cannot quantify—what Isha Schwaller De Lubicz[28] called the "*divine Word*,"

Han calls the "*Other*," and the Buddha calls Dhamma: that dimension of reality which must be experienced, not explained.

This condition causes a fear of mystery; a fear of not knowing, where reason becomes tyrant. It isolates itself from the living whole, and in so doing, strangles its own vitality. The intellect that refuses silence becomes sterile; it feeds upon its own echoes.

To fear mystery is to fear what cannot be reduced. Mystery, in this sense, is not superstition or the occult; it is the recognition of limits—the acknowledgment that life, consciousness, and being itself exceed the reach of analytic thought. Mystery is what remains alive when explanation ends. It is the silence that surrounds every insight, the interval between perception and naming.

When reason recoils from mystery, it severs itself from the living pulse of reality. It forgets that its task is not to conquer the unknown but to converse with it. The Buddha called this attitude *paññā*: wisdom that arises from seeing directly, not from accumulating conclusions.[29] De Lubicz saw the same truth when she wrote that intellect, once divorced from the creative principle, becomes sterile. Reason without reverence turns parasitic—it consumes its own reflections until nothing remains but noise.[30]

Those who now populate the later decades of life were born into a world still governed by the word no.[31] It was a society of boundaries, of moral pronouncements, of prohibitions that framed existence like the black bars of a window. The "no society," as Han would later call it, was crude but clear: it restrained desire through command and guilt. Children were shaped by its weight. To live under the rule of "no" was to know limitation, to internalize the external structure of authority—church, state, and family—all echoing the same injunction to obey. Fatigue then was muscular; it belonged to the body that labored under duty's yoke.

The generations that followed were not so much liberated as unmoored. When the external "no" dissolved into the permissive "yes," the human psyche did not shed its need for discipline—it simply relocated it inward. The child of the no society became the parent of the *achievement society*: a culture in which prohibition

gave way to performance, and where freedom was confused with possibility. The bars were removed, but the cell was internalized.

The Boomers, those born at the hinge between the two epochs, occupy an ambiguous place in this story. They remember the rigidity of authority but came of age during its unraveling. They learned to work, not merely to express. For many, achievement was still tethered to communal validation—to the family name, the company, the nation. When they grew tired, the body told them so, and rest was not yet a crime.

Their children, however, were raised in an entirely different ecology of the mind. They were not taught restraint but encouraged to expand endlessly, to build a self as one builds a brand. Their nervous systems became engines of production, calibrated to constant affirmation, stimulation, and self-monitoring. They are the true cerebral offspring—the generation whose fatigue arises not from labor but from thought itself, from the unrelenting need to prove vitality through activity.

Where the earlier generations learned shame through the eyes of others, the new ones learn it through the mirror of the self. The failure to achieve becomes a moral failure, a collapse of being. The Boomers, standing at the threshold, often look back with nostalgia upon the discipline that once constrained them, mistaking the comfort of structure for moral order. Yet many also look forward with envy at the intoxicating freedom of the *achievement society*, as if the ability to reinvent oneself could erase the scars of restraint. They are the bridge generation—simultaneously weary of command and seduced by permission.

As the population ages, one might imagine that the sheer mass of those who remember the "no" could serve as a brake upon the centrifugal force of the "yes."[32] Yet even this is uncertain. Many of the elderly have already been absorbed into the new economy of attention—rebranded as "active-agers," urged to stay productive, relevant, visible. The moral imperative to be good has become the psychological imperative to stay young.

Thus, the transformation from "no" to "yes" is not a story of liberation but of mutation. What once chained the body now inhabits the mind. The whip of obedience has become the whisper of motivation. The external prohibition has evolved into internal compulsion. And the fatigue that once came from toil now arises from thinking too much, feeling too little, and never knowing how to stop.

The cerebral offspring are not defined by age but by circuitry—those whose sense of self depends upon continuous activation, whose worth is measured in engagement, whose rest feels like death. They are the true heirs of the *achievement society*, born from the exhaustion of their parents' emancipation.

There exists an outward example of this, one in which, others as-well-as myself, have experienced. It happens during conversation. A gesture that now seems trivial: a hand reaches for a cell-phone, a question is murmured to Alexa, ChatGPT or Siri, a result appears in seconds. Yet this small act reveals the modern condition in miniature. Reason, having recoiled from mystery, no longer trusts its own seeing. It must outsource certainty. The device becomes the oracle of the age, dispensing answers with the mechanical confidence that only algorithms possess. The conversation, rather than being one of an exploratory nature; an exchange of ideas, is truncated – the oracle has spoken.[33]

But what truly matters is not the technology—it is the psychology behind the gesture. The question posed to Google or Alexa is rarely an act of inquiry; it is an act of confirmation. The wording is chosen not to discover but to defend. The search becomes a mirror held up to belief, reflecting back the very conviction one seeks to preserve. This is how the modern intellect has turned parasitic—it feeds upon its own assumptions and mistakes this self-referential loop for knowledge.

The Buddha would call this *diṭṭhi-upādāna*—clinging to views.[34] Once a view is grasped, the ego-mind bends reality to protect it. The search engine, then, becomes an extension of craving: not craving for truth, but craving for agreement. It gratifies the self's need to be right, the most subtle and seductive of all attachments.

Fromm might say that this habit reveals how alienated we have become from genuine thinking.[35] True thought, he wrote, is a dialogue between reason and experience; pseudo-thinking is the consumption of ready-made ideas. The modern individual, anxious in the face of uncertainty, prefers instant validation to the slow digestion of understanding. The machine promises relief from doubt—the very doubt that could have opened the door to wisdom.

In earlier ages, when reason still conversed with mystery, the unknown provoked reflection. One pondered, tested, and perhaps remained uncertain—but in that uncertainty, consciousness expanded. Today, the same encounter with the unknown provokes a reflex: Ask the machine. The search result arrives, the discomfort fades, and the mind resumes its habitual restlessness.

Yet even this ritual of digital divination reveals something deeper. When the answer returned by the machine fails to agree with one's belief, the reaction is rarely curiosity; it is irritation, even shame. The moment could have been one of discovery— "I was mistaken, and now I see more clearly"—but instead it becomes a wound to identity. The mind that confuses belief with selfhood experiences contradiction not as an invitation to grow, but as a personal insult.

The face tightens, the tone sharpens, and the conversation turns defensive. It is no longer about truth but about preservation. The intellect, instead of widening, encloses; folds; ossifies itself within its own image. One can almost feel the neural pathways tightening—the machinery of certainty whirring into gear. The machine's refusal to confirm our view is experienced as betrayal, as though the universe itself had erred in judgment.

Fromm would recognize this as a symptom of what he called marketing character: a self built upon validation. In a culture where worth depends on being right, admired, or agreed with, contradiction becomes intolerable. To admit error feels like erasure. And so, rather than adjust the view, the individual adjusts the question, reformulates the search, or retreats into cynicism—anything to restore the narcotic equilibrium of being correct.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya would call this *avijjā* in motion: ignorance asserting itself through reactivity.[36] When awareness is undeveloped, the mind cannot rest in not-knowing. It rushes to restore the illusion of solidity—an identity defined by opinions, not insight. The Buddha's counsel in such moments was simple but revolutionary: pause. Feel the discomfort. Observe the tightening. Let the need to be right reveal itself as just another craving passing through consciousness.

The tragedy of our time is that even with infinite access to information, we have lost the art of learning. We accumulate answers but resist change. Knowledge has become consumable rather than transformative. The algorithm provides data, but wisdom requires surrender—the willingness to let the truth rearrange one's inner landscape.

Thus, each moment of contradiction holds a hidden gate. If one could stay with the sting of being wrong, without reaching for defense, the mind would open like the pupil of an eye reacting to light. To learn, in the deepest sense, is not to collect facts but to dissolve the self that demands to be right.

In this context, is what Han describes as "*neuronal self-domination*:" a mind that both demands and supplies its own control.[37] It no longer needs priests or monarchs to enforce doctrine; the machine oracle has sophisticated algorithms that deliver orthodoxy tailored to its preferences. The master now lives in the circuitry of desire itself. Neither the oracle or the algorithm is the issue. The problem is hidden within the mind of the user who manipulates the oracle for its own preservation.

To see this clearly is to understand why silence feels dangerous in our age. Silence interrupts the loop. It denies the mind the comfort of confirmation and forces it to face the living pulse of not-knowing. That moment of suspension—when the hand hesitates before reaching for the phone—is the precise threshold between bondage and awakening.

Mystery is not the enemy of knowledge but its atmosphere.[38] To live without it is to suffocate in certainty. To live within it is to rediscover vitality—the freshness of mind that the Buddha

described as beginner's seeing, the ever-new awareness unburdened by the need to define.

It does not belong to imagination but to immediacy—the unmediated presence of existence before it is filtered through explanation. "What if," invents; "what is," reveals. The first speculates about possibilities; the second stands wordless before actuality. This mystery is not a riddle waiting to be solved but the inexhaustible reality that thought keeps circling without ever enclosing. It is the quiet astonishment of being itself—the recognition that something exists rather than nothing, and that this "something" forever exceeds the mind that seeks to define it.

Yet the modern mind cannot bear this stillness. Silence is the native tongue of mystery, but our age has forgotten the language. The nervous system, tuned to constant stimulation, experiences quiet not as invitation but as threat. The moment sound fades and screens go dark, anxiety rushes in to fill the void. We flee the silence in which mystery might speak because we have mistaken it for emptiness; the misunderstanding of the valuable kind of emptiness. But silence is not absence—it is depth. It is the dimension in which "what is" can be felt rather than merely known about.

When the mind loses contact with silence, mystery becomes intolerable, and inquiry collapses into noise. We replace wonder with information, reflection with reaction. Thus, the most profound act of intelligence today is not to speak more cleverly, but to listen more deeply—to relearn the courage to be still in the presence of what cannot be reduced. Only in such silence does the living world reveal itself as it truly is: whole, ungraspable, and mysteriously alive.

Yet it is precisely this encounter with mystery—the recognition that something remains beyond the grasp of intellect—that has always stirred the deepest movement of the human mind. Mystery, rightly seen, does not paralyze inquiry; it awakens it. It is the quiet summons that calls the artist to shape the ineffable into form, the scientist to press further into the invisible, the philosopher to question the foundations of knowing, the healer to seek the unseen

harmony that restores balance. Every true discipline begins not with mastery but with wonder.

This is, in truth, the very essence of the Buddha's awakening.[39] His question, "Why do we suffer?", is mystery in motion—the living wonder that stirs the mind from complacency into genuine seeing. It is not the question of a moralist seeking guilt, nor of a philosopher seeking abstraction, but of a human being confronting the incomprehensible fact of pain. The question itself is a gesture of reverence: an acknowledgment that something fundamental lies beyond immediate understanding, yet calls to be understood.

That question contains the seed of all civilization. For when the mind beholds what it cannot immediately resolve, it expands. The Buddha's inquiry was not born of despair but of awe—an astonishment that suffering exists at all, and that its existence might reveal the nature of life itself. Such wonder is the very fuel of wisdom. It was not faith that moved him, but curiosity disciplined by stillness.

In this sense, the Buddha's quest and the birth of art, science, and philosophy share the same root: the mind bowing before the unknown, yet reaching toward it with clear attention. The painter's canvas, the physicist's equation, and the sage's meditation all arise from this single movement of consciousness—the recognition that not knowing is the beginning of knowing.

The tragedy of the modern world is not that we lack mysteries, but that we have ceased to wonder at them. The Buddha's question reminds us that inquiry is sacred only when it begins in unpretentiousness. When we ask, "Why do we suffer?", with the same openness he embodied, we participate in the same awakening that gave birth to wisdom itself.

The tragedy of the modern age is not that mystery has vanished, but that we have ceased to honor it. We interpret it as a problem rather than a presence. Instead of allowing mystery to deepen our perception, we rush to solve it, to convert the ineffable into data. But every time we do, the living pulse of inquiry fades a little more. The vitality of reason depends upon what it cannot conquer. When

it loses contact with that horizon, thought becomes circular, feeding upon itself until nothing remains but repetition.

To return to mystery is to restore depth to perception. It is to remember that knowing is not possession but participation. In that remembrance, the intellect regains its dignity as servant of understanding rather than its tyrant. It becomes what it was meant to be: the clear mirror through which the luminous unknown can glance back at itself.

This is the true face of self-domination: not chains around the body, but noise around the mind. The serpent of greed and the angel of intellect are one—restless energy seeking endless growth, mistaking agitation for life. Han calls it the "*ideology of positivity*;" the Buddha names it *taṇhā*, the craving that perpetuates suffering. Both reveal that our worship of freedom has become devotion to compulsion.

Counterfeit Joy

Those who expose this confusion are accused of opposing happiness. In truth, they threaten only our attachment to counterfeit joy—the freedom to remain enslaved.

What passes for joy in the *achievement society* is often a counterfeit—an imitation so convincing that even exhaustion mistakes it for life.[40] It glitters but does not glow. Counterfeit joy is the pleasure of completion without the peace of understanding, the satisfaction of applause without the stillness of contentment. It is born not of freedom but of relief—the brief easing of the tension created by craving itself.

This counterfeit joy is the emotional currency of our time. It surges when the notification pings, when the project is finished, when the purchase arrives. The nervous system, conditioned to chase stimulation, interprets the end of striving as happiness. Yet beneath the smile of success there lingers the faint taste of depletion. What feels like joy is merely the body catching its breath before the next demand; the next rush of the temporary satisfaction of desire.

The Buddha would call this the pleasure that leads to weariness: fleeting, dependent, conditional.[41] It is joy measured in intervals between pressures. True joy—*pīti* born of awareness—does not depend on outcome; it arises from presence itself. But the modern mind, having forgotten how to rest, confuses the cessation of pressure with happiness. When the inbox empties, when the body collapses on the couch, the relief feels transcendent for a moment—until the next wave of anxiety returns.

Fromm would say that this joy is not "being" but "having."[42] We do not experience delight; we acquire it. Even our happiness must now be possessed, displayed, shared, validated, be transparent. It exists only when witnessed, only when echoed by the gaze of others. Thus, the *achievement society* cannot sustain genuine joy, because it has severed joy from silence. It must always be documented, compared, or performed.

Counterfeit joy is exhausting precisely because it is conditional. It depends upon movement—upon the next success, the next affirmation, the next acquisition. It feeds upon the nervous system it eventually destroys. The more one chases it, the more fragile it becomes. This is why the modern smile so often hides fatigue: it is not the sign of fullness but of effort—the effort to appear complete.

To see this clearly is already to loosen its grip. Genuine joy is simple, selfless, and quiet. It does not arise from the collapse of craving but from the absence of it. It has no opposite because it depends on nothing. It is the joy that remains when there is no need to prove, no need to perform, and no need to win.

The remedy is not withdrawal from the world but an inward act of seeing.[43] Awareness must learn again to dwell in stillness. Only there does the nervous system remember its natural rhythm. When the noise of self-domination fades, consciousness re-aligns with reality itself: not the "self" that performs, but the knowing that simply is.

Chapter 2 - Fetish of Becoming

> "*Becoming leads to birth; birth leads to sorrow. Seeing this, the wise find no delight in becoming.*"
>
> — Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.20[1]

> "*Modern man lives under the illusion that he knows what he wants, while he actually wants what he is supposed to want.*"
>
> — Erich Fromm, "To Have or To Be?"[2]

The word fetish has been thinned by modern usage until it is nearly trivial, evoking the private quirks of certain appetites. Yet its older meaning carries far more weight—and it is this earlier sense that concerns us here.

In its first life, fetish described the object onto which ancient people projected invisible power—a stone, a carving, a charm believed to contain agency of its own. In time, Karl Marx extended the term to the marketplace, describing how human beings forget that commodities are merely the fruit of labor, not talismans endowed with mystical worth.[3] Later, Freud borrowed the same word to describe the psyche's desperate substitutions: the mind's power to endow one thing with the emotional charge of another, disguising its own vulnerability.[4]

All these meanings converge in the modern cult of self-improvement. We no longer worship idols made of gold or wood; we worship "becoming" itself—the perpetual project of self-upgrade. The gym body, the optimized schedule, the curated persona: each function as a sacred object, promising, at the very least happiness, at the extreme, salvation through progress. The process of "becoming someone" or "becoming something" has become the ritual through which modern man reassures himself that he exists.

Byung-Chul Han names this the *fetish of becoming*: the hidden devotion to transformation as an end in itself.[5] The Buddha, long before Han, exposed the same enchantment under another name—*bhava-taṇhā*, the craving for existence, the thirst to *become* something, someone. In both visions, the object of worship is the

same: the self in motion, the fantasy that fulfillment lies in the next iteration.

To use the word fetish here is not indulgence but precision. It names the misplaced reverence we give to our own striving, the near-religious fervor with which we chase an image of ourselves that never stands still. And it reminds us, as the Buddha did, that what we worship most devoutly often imprisons us most completely.

The modern age has turned becoming into a sacred commandment. "Be more," "reinvent yourself," "never stop growing," "never stop achieving,"—these are no longer suggestions; they are moral imperatives. Yet beneath their bright surface lies an old, primitive logic, the kind the Buddha would have recognized instantly: the mind worshiping its own projections.

The word fetish captures this precisely. Its original meaning was not the private quirk of desire, but the act of endowing an object with power it does not possess. In the early religious sense, a fetish was a charm believed to contain spirit; in Marx's sense, a commodity believed to contain value; in Freud's sense, an image believed to contain safety. In every case, the fetish is a lie of agency—an illusion that disguises dependence.

So, it is with *becoming*. We have made of self-improvement a modern fetish, believing that the act of striving itself has redemptive power. *Becoming* is not simply our verb—it has become our god. We kneel before the ideal of progress, achievement, investing it with the promise of meaning, fulfillment, even salvation. We measure worth by motion: to be still is to fail.

And yet, in this devotion, we enact the oldest psychological trick: we enslave ourselves to what we believe we control. The modern self stands as both master and servant of its own compulsion. It commands itself to "achieve," then obeys without question. The whip and the hand that wields it belong to the same person.

Byung-Chul Han calls this the "achievement subject"—a being whose freedom has inverted into self-coercion. The Buddha described the same cycle in the turning of *bhava*, becoming: the ceaseless birth of "I am," driven by craving – the craving to become

“something,” “something other,” “something new.” Every new layer of identity, dressed in positivity, soothes the insecurity beneath it, yet only adds another bar to our cage.

To call this a fetish is not exaggeration. It is the most accurate diagnosis of our modern malaise. We have deified the process of *becoming*, mistaking compulsion for purpose and exhaustion for growth. The Buddha’s insight cuts through this spell: to see the craving to “become” as the very cause of suffering is to recognize that liberation lies not in becoming more—but in ceasing to worship the need to become at all.

The Invisible Malaise

The tragedy of the modern malaise is that it hides in plain sight. It is not an illness that announces itself, but one that masquerades as health. The compulsion to achieve feels like vitality; the restlessness of *becoming* feels like progress. Our fatigue wears the mask of purpose. We confuse stimulation for aliveness, busyness for meaning, anxiety for ambition.

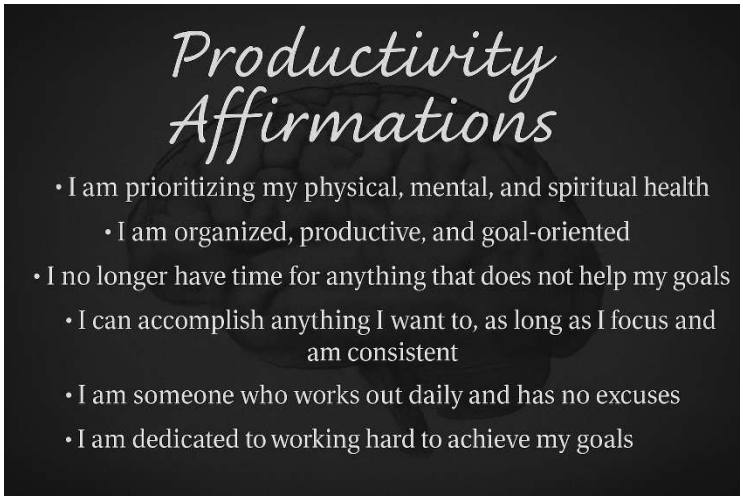
This is why it is so difficult to recognize. The very symptom has become the standard of health. The culture teaches us that stillness is laziness, that doubt is failure, that to pause is to fall behind. And so, we defend the very disease that drains us, calling it “drive.” We polish our chains and call them “goals.”

This malaise is not external—it has been internalized. It no longer shouts from authority; it whispers from within, in our own voice. Han called this the shift from the “*disciplinary society*” to the “*achievement society*:” We no longer need masters because we have become our own. The whip is now self-generated, the command self-issued. The psyche has absorbed the entire mechanism of control.

Here lies the true conundrum. What the Buddha saw as *bhava*, the cycle of *becoming*, is no longer experienced as suffering but as the very definition of being alive. The cage has become so familiar that we decorate it with affirmations. To suggest that liberation

means ceasing to become sounds, to the modern ear, like death. Yet it is precisely this confusion—the inability to distinguish aliveness from agitation—that sustains the malaise.

The Mind of the *Achievement Society*


Productivity Affirmations
• I am prioritizing my physical, mental, and spiritual health
• I am organized, productive, and goal-oriented
• I no longer have time for anything that does not help my goals
• I can accomplish anything I want to, as long as I focus and am consistent
• I am someone who works out daily and has no excuses
• I am dedicated to working hard to achieve my goals

Consider the text-image above. At first glance, it radiates health, determination, and discipline—the very virtues modern culture exalts. Each line seems harmless, even noble: "I am productive," "I am responsible," "I can accomplish anything." Yet beneath these polished affirmations hums a quiet domination.

The speaker believes they are affirming freedom, but what they are really doing is submitting to command. Every sentence begins with "I" and "I am"—the mantra of self-construction—and each one binds that self tighter to the machinery of achievement. The modern subject no longer needs an overseer; the voice of mastery now lives inside the head. What was once external coercion has become internal devotion.

"I am dedicated to working hard." "I no longer have time for anything that does not help me reach my goals." The cadence is almost religious—a creed of self-improvement recited with moral fervor. Yet listen carefully: where is rest, where is contemplation –

meditation - stillness? Where is ease, or the capacity to simply be? This language leaves no space for it. The entire life of the mind is organized around utility. The achievement-self must always be optimized, made worthy through effort, purified through productivity.

This is the precise moment where the fetish reveals itself. These affirmations invest becoming—the act of striving—with magical power. They suggest that salvation lies not in wisdom or peace, but in constant motion – constant achievement – the constant desire to *become*. The self, once thought to be master of its fate, is now enslaved by its own affirmations, commanding itself to perform without pause.

Byung-Chul Han calls this the paradox of the achievement subject: "*The exploiter is simultaneously the exploited.*" The Buddha described the same paradox in the chain of dependent origination—*upādāna-paccayā bhavo*—"*clinging gives rise to becoming.*[6] Each affirmation is an act of clinging disguised as freedom, a reaffirmation of the illusion "I am this" and "I must become that."

To read these statements as ordinary motivation is to miss their deeper significance. They are the catechism of the modern malaise: a self so terrified of stillness that it recites its bondage as virtue. What once was discipline has become devotion; what once was effort has become identity.

And this is what the Buddha meant when he said that craving for becoming is the root of suffering. For when the will to improve eclipses the capacity to see, the mind becomes trapped in its own reflection—forever chasing, never arriving.

Clinging Gives Rise to Becoming

When the Buddha said, "*Clinging gives rise to becoming*"—*upādāna-paccayā bhavo*—he was not speaking of a single act of attachment but of a process so habitual, so reflexive, that it defines the very structure of human experience. The word *upādāna*—usually translated as "clinging"—does not mean simple holding or

possession. It means appropriation, the mental act of taking something transient and treating it as "mine." It is the moment when experience, which is fluid by nature, is seized and attributed to the identity of the self.

This clinging is not confined to objects or people. It extends to ideas, roles, beliefs, and even to the image of who we think we are. The mind cannot bear the groundlessness of change, so it constructs continuity by identifying with what it touches. It grasps sensations as pleasure, feelings as truth, thoughts as identity. From this grasping, an inner, conceptual world is born—the world of "I" and "mine."

The Buddha described four principal forms of this clinging: to sensual pleasure, to views and opinions, to rites and methods, and above all, to the notion of self. Each is a variant of the same delusion: that something impermanent can provide stability, that one can rest in what is forever moving. Clinging is therefore not merely attachment—it is the psychological act that sustains existence as becoming.[7]

In this sense, *upādāna* is the engine of bhava, *becoming*. Each act of grasping plants the seed of a new "self," a new configuration of identity. When we cling to pleasure, we become the one who desires; when we cling to views, we become the believer; when we cling to achievement, we become the achiever. This is the hidden meaning of *upādāna-paccayā bhavo*: whatever we cling to, we become.[8] The self is not a fixed entity but the continual result of what it appropriates.

This is not philosophy but observation. When the mind attaches itself to a thought or emotion, it enters that shape. If anger arises and is grasped, we become anger; if pride arises and is cherished, we become pride. Each grasping renews the cycle of birth—not the biological event, but the psychological birth of "I am." Thus, becoming is not a movement forward in time, but an incessant re-creation of identity in every moment.

Seen in this light, the Buddha's teaching reveals the mechanism of mental and emotional bondage: clinging is the creator of the self and the architect of its suffering. Liberation does not come from

adding virtues to the self but from seeing through the illusion that the self can be secured at all. The end of clinging is the end of becoming. In that cessation, there is no annihilation—only the release from the compulsion to "be," to label it as "this is me"– the drive of desire to *become* something, someone.

To awaken, then, is not to reject the world but to recognize the current that carries it. It is to see how the demand to "be someone" arises not from freedom, but from fear; not from vitality, but from the refusal to face stillness. And once seen clearly, that current begins to lose its power. We begin to see what we really are.

Human life, as it is now lived, feels like a project under construction. We wake each day already in motion, compelled by an unfinished story of who we must yet become. We decorate this compulsion with noble language—growth, purpose, self-realization—but beneath it lies unease, the sense that what we are now is never enough.

Erich Fromm once wrote that modern man has replaced the question "*How should I live?*" with "*How can I become?*" "*How can I transform myself, and kill the self I don't want to be?*" The shift seems subtle, but it changes everything. Life becomes an endless audition for a part we never quite win. Each achievement fades into a new dissatisfaction. Each reinvention grows stale the moment it is realized. *Becoming* has developed into the most seductive of our fetishes—the promise that salvation lies just one transformation away; if only I could *become* this; if only I could *become* that. Han states that this perception is the taskmaster; not one of "cannot" or "do not," but "you can," driving us by our own inner taskmaster saying "you must," "you must will yourself to *become*." This is a mask of positivism, that convinces us and drives us, pushes us mercilessly, until we become mentally and emotionally tired – suffering exhaustion being driven by our own will.

The Buddha saw this long before the modern age gave it slogans and hashtags. In his language, the word for this ceaseless drive was *bhava*—becoming. Bhava is not a noun, not a thing we possess; it is a verb, a movement of the mind. It is the act of constructing, not

only the sense of "I am," but of "I will become," again and again, out of craving and habit. Each moment of grasping shapes a new perception of "self," as if the mind were a potter endlessly spinning clay without ever letting the wheel stop.

When the Buddha said, "*With clinging as condition, becoming; with becoming as condition, birth,*" he was describing more than physical rebirth. He was describing the psychological rebirth that happens in every instant we cling to an identity or desire. We are born as the offended one, the ambitious one, the fearful one—hundreds of selves arising and fading in a single day. This is *saṃsāra*, the wheel – the cycle - not of worlds, but of reactions.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya would say: watch the mind as it moves toward becoming.[9] Notice the tension, the effort, the subtle unease. Whenever there is the thought "I will be" or "I must become," there is also fear. There is comparison, measuring, and the quiet belief that peace lies somewhere else. Awareness that sees this clearly does not stop the world; it simply refuses to be caught by its momentum. Thus, our idea of "*success,*" becomes what we think it should be.

Imagine, for a moment, a person who is overweight and decides to get healthy. There is nothing inherently wrong in this desire. The wish to move with ease, to breathe more deeply, to live without pain—these are natural expressions of care for the body. But in the achievement society, the simple wish for well-being quickly mutates into a project of becoming. The effort to be healthy is replaced by the pressure to become someone—to become thin, beautiful, or admirable. The goal is no longer the joy of movement or the balance of life; it is the construction of a new self.

This is how the Buddha's teaching on *bhava*, becoming, takes shape in ordinary life. The mind does not simply act; it attaches identity to its action. "If I lose weight, I will become worthy." "If I gain muscle, I will become confident." Each plan is charged with psychological currency, a promise that existence will be redeemed through transformation. But this transformation is not freedom; it is compulsion in disguise.

To the Buddha, the suffering lies not in the desire to change, but in the clinging—the subtle conviction that a different version of "me" will finally complete the story. It is this identification with an imagined self that gives rise to becoming. The person is no longer simply exercising; they are rehearsing a new identity, measuring each effort against an internal image of success. The treadmill becomes a moral altar; the mirror, a tribunal.

This is the same psychological mechanism that fuels the burnout of the achievement subject. The body, like the career or the mind, becomes a site of production—something to optimize, sculpt, and display. The craving to be well is eclipsed by the craving to be seen as well. The Buddha would say that this is the point where desire transforms into bondage, where the mind's natural wish for ease becomes ensnared by its own image of perfection.

Becoming, then, is not about the object of desire—it is about the story we weave around it. The same action can lead either to wisdom or to weariness, depending on whether it is performed with awareness or identification. The healthy person who eats mindfully and walks with joy is free of becoming; the person who counts every calorie as evidence of their future self is trapped within it. The outer behavior may appear identical, but inwardly one is engaged in life, while the other is constructing a self.

To understand this is to see what the Buddha meant by *bhava-taṇhā*, the craving for existence. It is the hunger to be someone, the unseen hand that turns every human aspiration into a moral debt to one's imagined self. And so, the Buddha's teaching does not condemn ambition; it points out that the moment ambition becomes self-definition, it ceases to be liberating. True freedom is not in becoming more—but in being fully alive to what is, before the mind seizes it as "me."

Fromm called this our "*escape from freedom*."[10] The more we chase self-improvement; the desire to become "something" we think we are not, the more imprisoned we become by the image of the perfected self we worship. The neoliberal subject—Han's "*achievement-self*"—is only the modern expression of *bhava-taṇhā*,

the craving for existence that the Buddha diagnosed as the root of suffering. The factory of the self now runs on optimization, but the product is the same old illusion: the belief that we can finally become something secure.

The Buddha's path does not oppose growth, but questions the motive behind it. Why do we wish to become? What are we escaping from when we strive to be more? The Buddha points not toward another stage of becoming, but toward the ending of the very need to become. In the silence that follows the cessation of becoming, there is no failure, no success—only the peace that comes when the wheel of the desire to become "something," stops turning.

We imagine that to live is to advance, to transform, to leave behind what we were for what we might yet be. This idea feels so natural, so self-evident, that to question it seems absurd. But this unquestioned drive is the very spell we live under—the fetish of becoming.

As was discussed earlier, a fetish, in its oldest sense, is an object endowed with imaginary power, something ordinary that we mistake for the source of meaning. We forget that we ourselves invest it with worth, and in that forgetting, it begins to rule us. Becoming is precisely such an object. We have wrapped it in the language of progress and self-discovery, of "potential" and "purpose," until the act of striving itself seems sacred. It has become our invisible idol, glowing with the promise that somewhere, beyond this moment, we will finally arrive; we will finally own - possess.

But the Buddha exposed this mirage with surgical precision. *Bhava-taṇhā*—the craving for existence, for becoming—is not life's fuel but its fever. It is the hidden mechanism by which suffering and dissatisfaction perpetuates itself. Each new self we build is an altar to insecurity; each ambition another offering to fear. *Becoming*, which we imagine will deliver us, is the very thing that binds us to dissatisfaction.

The Fetish of Spiritual Becoming

The same pattern that drives worldly ambition can quietly infiltrate even the most sacred pursuits. The craving to become—to achieve, to improve, to be transformed—does not vanish when one turns toward the Dhamma; it merely dons a more virtuous robe.

The first question that arises in the mind of one who seeks to learn the Dhamma should be: "Why do I want to learn the Dhamma?" And the answer, though sincere, is revealing. "I want to *become* less anxious." "I want to *become* more peaceful." "I want to *become* free from anger." These are not unwholesome wishes; they are deeply human. But the subtle trap lies in the structure of the thought itself—the hidden conviction that there is someone who must become something other than what is. Remember, Dhamma means "to see things as they are." So, to want to learn the Dhamma means that you want to "see things as they are." How prepared are you for that?

If the desire to learn the Dhamma is centered on "becoming." The Buddha would say that such desire is already a form of *bhava-taṇhā*, the craving for becoming. The mind has projected an image of a future self, serene and enlightened, and has mistaken that image for the path itself. Practice becomes a performance, meditation another kind of labor, and the Dhamma, instead of being a mirror, becomes merchandise.

The achievement subject approaches the Dhamma as it approaches every other field of endeavor: as something to be mastered, possessed, and displayed. The ancient word *upādāna*, "clinging," finds its modern expression here—not in the crude grasping of worldly pleasure, but in the refined attachment to wisdom itself. The Dhamma becomes a project, a credential of inner progress. The student begins to measure attainment as one measures success, mistaking comprehension for realization, and mistaking the text for the truth.

But the Dhamma cannot be possessed, because it does not exist as an object apart from seeing itself. To learn it is not to add something to the self, but to watch the self's machinery of becoming slow and fall silent. The Dhamma is not the path to becoming calm; it is the insight that exposes the one who craves calm as the very cause of restlessness. It does not promise that you will become peaceful—it shows that peace was never absent, only obscured by the mind's endless effort to improve itself.

To think, even subtly, that the Dhamma is something that can be owned or contained is to miss its essence entirely. For once the Dhamma has truly taken root in a person's life, once its truth has been integrated and lived—its proof being the clear understanding of how to end clinging and thus suffering—there is no longer a separation between the practitioner and the teaching. The Dhamma is no longer something one has; it is what one is. This means seeing what you actually are. This is the point of the Dhamma, and the starting

At that point, the need to possess it vanishes, because possession implies distance, and distance implies ignorance. The person who has seen through clinging does not carry the Dhamma as knowledge but breathes it as reality. They are no longer a student of the Dhamma; they are its expression—the living continuity of awakening in human form.

The Buddha's teaching, then, stands as the great reversal of the *achievement society's* logic. The Dhamma does not feed the project of becoming; it dismantles it. It releases the mind from the compulsion to perfect itself and reveals the quiet sufficiency of things as they are. Learning, in the truest sense, is not accumulation but unburdening—the shedding of all claims to progress, possession, and personal perfection.

The irony remains: the one who seeks to "become enlightened" will never find enlightenment, for enlightenment is precisely the end of the seeker. The irony is exquisite: the one who seeks to "become enlightened" will never find enlightenment, for enlightenment is precisely the end of the seeker.

This is the cruel genius of the fetish: it turns our own projections into prisons. We imbue "becoming" with magical power—as if by perfecting, optimizing, or transcending ourselves, we could secure what is by nature fleeting. We treat impermanence as error and the unfinished self as sin. And so, the wheel keeps turning: craving becomes clinging, clinging becomes becoming, and becoming leads us right back to where we began, the birth of a new becoming—again and again, in mind and in life.

To see this clearly is to feel a subtle but profound disillusionment, the kind that precedes awakening. For the moment the fetish is recognized as fetish, its spell breaks. The sacred object is revealed as ordinary, and the restless project of self-creation begins to lose its glamour. What remains is not apathy but release: the quiet knowing that nothing needs to be added to make this moment whole.

The Buddha did not promise a better becoming. He pointed to the end of becoming altogether. And in that ending—where the compulsion to be something finally falls silent—lies the freedom we mistook for the next horizon. This then, gives us clarification of Fromm's existential question, "To Have or To Be?"

Chapter 3 - The Society of Fatigue

> *"We no longer collapse beneath the weight of others' chains, but beneath the silence of our own applause."*
>
> -Dipobhāsadhamma

Fatigue has become the ambient mood of modern civilization—the quiet hum beneath every achievement, every affirmation, every smile that says I'm fine. We live not in a world of oppression but of permission, and yet the permission to do anything has become the compulsion to do everything. Our exhaustion is not the residue of labor; it is the residue of meaning lost amid ceaseless activity.

Byung-Chul Han recognized that the old disciplinary structures—those that once drew clear lines between master and servant, work and rest—have dissolved.[1]

In their place stands a subtler tyranny: the self as both exploiter and exploited. We have internalized the factory, turned the assembly line inward, and begun to mass-produce ourselves. Each thought, each post, each small victory becomes another unit in the endless production of identity. This is not work in the old sense. It is ontological labor—the exhausting effort to become something - someone.

In such a society, fatigue is no longer a symptom of overexertion; it is the atmosphere we breathe. The very air is charged with the expectation of performance. We call it freedom, yet it feels like obligation. We call it connection, yet it isolates. To rest has become an act of quiet rebellion, and to be unproductive feels like moral failure.

The Buddha would have recognized this as the inevitable outcome of craving turned inward.[2] *Taṇhā*, once tethered to external possessions, now clings to the self's own image. In the endless scroll of comparison, the mind becomes its own treadmill, running nowhere yet terrified to stop. The wheel of *saṃsāra* no longer spins in monasteries or metaphysics—it turns on our devices, on our ambitions, in the nervous circuitry of our attention.

What makes this pathology nearly invisible is its normalization. Fatigue masquerades as diligence; anxiety is praised as drive. The collapse of rest into guilt and of silence into emptiness marks a culture that no longer knows how to dwell, only how to move. The self that cannot stop becomes its own punishment, bound not by chains but by momentum.

The Buddha called this restless condition *dukkha*—not merely suffering, but the grinding friction of dissatisfaction; a wheel that cannot turn smoothly because its hub is off-center.[3] Our civilization is such a wheel: gleaming, fast, yet fundamentally unbalanced. To recognize this imbalance is to glimpse the hidden wound of modern life—the neuronal dukkha that Han describes not as an illness of individuals, but as the structural fatigue of an entire age.

Achievement has become our new morality. The commandments of the industrial age—work hard, obey, produce—have been replaced by a single imperative: excel. The modern person, once disciplined by others, is now driven by the inner demand to "become more." This demand has no ceiling and no rest. It cannot be satisfied because its object is infinite: the self must endlessly justify its existence through performance. What was once a question of survival has become a question of worth.

In the age of production, fatigue was physical. One could rest, recover, and begin again. But in the age of performance, fatigue seeps into the mind's deepest recesses. It is no longer the body that collapses first—it is meaning that gives way. The endless injunction to improve, optimize, and achieve turns human life into a series of metrics. Even meditation is marketed as productivity enhancement; even stillness must now prove its utility. The field of experience itself is monetized, parceled into fragments of measurable "engagement."

Byung-Chul Han calls this the tyranny of positivity—the compulsion to affirm, to smile, to remain upbeat while collapsing inside.[4] Negativity, which once served as the immune system of the psyche, has been pathologized. We no longer allow ourselves the luxury of saying "no," of refusing, of withdrawing. Yet the Buddha

saw long ago that liberation begins with renunciation—the wise refusal to be enslaved by craving.[5] In our time, renunciation appears as failure because we have confused stillness with stagnation, and quiet with emptiness.

The tragedy is not that people are tired; it is that they cannot admit they are tired. Fatigue has become shameful. To confess exhaustion feels like moral weakness, an admission that one has failed to keep pace with the speed of life. But life has no law defining a predetermined pace. The universe does not hurry; only the human mind does. It races toward some imagined completion, some perfected version of itself that forever recedes as it advances. This is the great mirage of becoming—the very engine of *dukkha*.

The Buddha's philosophy cuts directly across this illusion. To see clearly is to understand that the striving to be something—to become—is itself the source of exhaustion. The moment one ceases to worship achievement as identity, one steps out of the cycle of fatigue.[6] Rest is not the absence of activity; it is the absence of compulsion. Peace is not slowness; it is freedom from the restless need to prove.

As the individual grows weary, society becomes hollow. The self-exploiting subject may appear autonomous, but it is a solitary figure—sealed within its own performance. Fatigue is contagious not through touch, but through imitation. A culture that celebrates constant activity inherits the nervous system of its ideals: every interaction becomes a transaction of effort, every silence a failure to engage. We live surrounded by people, yet rarely with them.

The paradox is cruel: in a world more connected than ever, loneliness has become epidemic. We no longer live among others so much as alongside their projections—their curated selves, each shimmering with effort, each concealing exhaustion. The collective psyche becomes a hall of mirrors: everyone is seen, but no one is met. This is not community, but mutual surveillance disguised as intimacy.

Byung-Chul Han calls this "*the transparency society*," where the demand to be visible replaces the need to be understood.[7] The human being, once defined by inwardness, has been flattened into

its surface. Even the language of care is standardized—algorithmic sympathy, instant condolences, prescribed wellness. Compassion, which in the Buddha's teaching arises from seeing directly into another's suffering, loses its depth when fatigue blinds the eye of empathy.[8]

In such a landscape, even love becomes labor. The endless management of one's image, moods, and relationships turn affection into administration. We measure ourselves not by the depth of connection, but by its visibility. To rest from performance—even for a moment—feels like disappearance. To withdraw is to risk irrelevance.

In his book, *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley envisioned a civilization that had abolished suffering not through wisdom, but through sedation.[9] Pleasure replaced reflection; comfort replaced consciousness. The people of his world are not ruled by fear but by contentment—by the gentle coercion of ease. What he saw, decades before the digital age, was that a society need not be brutal to destroy the human spirit. It need only be relentlessly positive.

This is the soft illusion of positivity —what Han calls the "*smooth violence*" of a transparent age—where freedom is replaced by choice and choice by habit.[10] In Huxley's world, every emotion that might deepen the human experience is anesthetized by soma, the state-sanctioned drug of happiness. But today our soma requires no pills. It streams, scrolls, vibrates in the pocket. It is the dopamine architecture of our digital environment—our endless access to affirmation without intimacy, novelty without meaning.

Huxley understood something the Buddha articulated long ago: that craving is not extinguished by satisfaction but inflamed by it.[11] When every desire can be instantly met, the mind no longer rests—it decays. The citizens of Huxley's "World State" live in a perpetual now, their consciousness flattened into what Han would later call "*the positivity of the same*." Nothing resists; nothing is negative; therefore, nothing reveals.[12] The very absence of friction—of uncertainty, of limitation, of silence—becomes the disease.

In both Huxley's dystopia and our present, fatigue is not born of oppression but of abundance. When life is reduced to comfort, meaning evaporates. The endless production of pleasure becomes its own punishment, a mirror of the modern compulsion to perform, post, and perfect the self. In such a world, meditation would be considered antisocial, silence subversive. The still mind is the last act of rebellion. The question this produces in the minds people of the *achievement society* is: "What is my purpose in life?"

The Buddha's philosophy speaks precisely to the emptiness beneath this artificial serenity. Where Huxley's citizens flee pain, the Buddha invites us to see it. For in seeing lies the return of depth, the restoration of inwardness that modernity has stripped away. To suffer consciously, he taught, is to reclaim the full range of being human.[13] The conditioned happiness of Huxley's "World State" is no different from our own algorithmic bliss: both are built upon ignorance of *dukkha*; ignorance of the cause for our own dissatisfaction; built upon the fear of facing the mind unfiltered.

In *Brave New World*, the outcast John the Savage becomes the tragic emblem of this insight.[14] He hungers for truth in a world that has outlawed it. His rebellion is not political but existential—he wants to feel fully, even to suffer, because he knows that without sorrow there can be no wisdom. "I claim the right to be unhappy," he cries.[15] In that defiant sentence, Huxley's dystopia touches the Dhamma: liberation begins not with more comfort, but with the courage to confront discomfort.

The Buddha's insight into *dukkha* could not be more contemporary. When the mind clings to form and feeling, it creates its own prison; when a society clings to image and approval, it does the same. The exhaustion of our age is not merely physical or emotional—it is ontological. We are tired of maintaining the fiction of who we think we are. Fatigue, in its most profound sense, is the body's protest against illusion.

And yet, there is within fatigue a faint seed of awakening. In the stillness that follows collapse, something honest stirs. The mind, stripped of pretense, glimpses the futility of endless doing. This moment of quiet disillusionment—so feared in our culture—was for

the Buddha the beginning of wisdom. It is here that seeing begins; not in striving for meaning, but in the gentle recognition that the pursuit itself was the source of our sorrow.

The Still Mind and the End of Becoming

The most cunning feature of the fatigue society is that it convinces us exhaustion is a mark of virtue. Weariness becomes proof of effort, and effort proof of worth. To stop striving feels like betrayal, not of the world, but of oneself. Yet what is this "self" that must always be proven?

Ajahn Sumedho, a student of Ajahn Chah, addressed this question not through philosophy but through awareness. In his gentle way, he points to the root of our exhaustion: the habit of taking life personally.[16] Each thought, each success, each failure becomes "mine." Each emotion is something to correct or defend. The world presses upon us not because it is heavy, but because we hold everything in the tight fist of identification.

Sumedho's phrase —"don't take it personally"— sounds deceptively simple, but it carries the same revolutionary force as the Buddha's insight into non-self.[17] It does not mean withdrawal or apathy. It means seeing experience without turning it into identity. When awareness is pure, events still happen—work continues, choices are made—but there is no longer the added weight of "I" and "mine."

This is precisely where Han's analysis of self-exploitation finds its psychological counterpart. The modern subject, caught in an endless cycle of becoming, mistakes the effort to sustain identity for freedom.[18] Each affirmation, each achievement, momentarily soothes the anxiety of impermanence, yet the relief fades, demanding another performance. The self becomes both producer and product, both laborer and commodity.

Sumedho dismantles this machinery by turning attention back upon itself.[19] Instead of trying to fix the tired self, he invites awareness of the fatigue itself. Observe the body's heaviness, the

mind's dull ache, without interference. Who is tired? Where is this "I" that claims exhaustion? The more deeply one looks, the more the supposed doer dissolves into process—thoughts arising and passing, sensations flickering, feelings shifting. The burden of selfhood begins to lighten, and with it, the fatigue of becoming.

In that recognition lies the most subversive form of freedom. The Buddha's path does not end in success or self-improvement but in relinquishment.[20] To stop taking life personally is to let go of the illusion that we are at the center of everything that happens. The modern person, addicted to visibility, what Han calls transparency, resists this truth; yet only in vanishing as a performance does one reappear as presence.

Sumedho's wisdom stands as a quiet antidote to Han's diagnosis. Where Han reveals the pathology of a world enslaved by positivity, Sumedho restores the possibility of peace through detachment—not detachment as avoidance, but as intimacy freed from ownership[21]. Fatigue then ceases to be a symptom and becomes a signal—a call to awaken from the hypnosis of "I am," "I must become something - someone."

In this way, the teachings of a forest monk and the observations of a cultural philosopher converge upon the same point: liberation begins when the self steps aside. The mind that no longer clings, no longer performs, no longer claims, finds rest not by withdrawing from the world but by ceasing to confuse itself with what it experiences. This is the stillness that remains when the wheel of becoming stops spinning—not the end of life, but the end of its fever.

The Soft Illusion of Positivity

The modern person does not submit to fatigue by force, but by seduction.[22] No one commands us to overwork, overshare, or overthink. We volunteer. The transformation from oppression to self-exploitation succeeds precisely because it hides its coercion inside desire. The old tyrant said, "You must." The new one whispers, "You can."

It begins innocently: with the promise of possibility. Every screen and slogan assures us that freedom lies in limitless choice. To be human now means to be a project—an unfinished manuscript forever being edited. At first, this feels empowering. Yet the very openness of possibility soon becomes its own burden. For if everything is possible, then not achieving everything becomes personal failure. The horizon of freedom turns into the metric of inadequacy.

This is the first snare: identification through comparison. Once the self looks outward for confirmation of worth, it begins to disappear into the collective mirror. The mind's attention—its most sacred faculty—is captured by the endless scroll of others' curated perfections. What masquerades as connection is actually calibration: "Am I enough?" "Do I belong?" The fatigue that follows is not only from overwork but from over-measurement.

The second snare is performance as belonging. To participate in modern society is to participate in spectacle. Visibility, transparency, becomes proof of existence. The unseen life—the quiet, contemplative, unquantified life—feels like death. So, we post, produce, achieve, and affirm, not out of joy, but out of fear of invisibility. This, too, the Buddha would recognize as a form of *bhava-taṇhā*—craving for becoming.[23] One must constantly become something to keep the illusion of being someone.

The third and deepest snare is self-alienation through positivity. Han's insight here is surgical: the demand to be positive, productive, and perpetually resilient silences the voice that might resist. We become complicit in our own oppression because it feels virtuous. Suffering is rebranded as growth; anxiety is reframed as ambition.[24] In the Buddha's language, this is delusion (*moha*): not ignorance of what is wrong, but blindness to the fact that the sickness is mistaken for health.

To be swallowed by this conformity, then, is to lose the capacity for inner dissent. The mind's still, observing quality—the one capable of saying "enough"—atrophies. Silence, which once protected reflection, becomes unbearable. In its absence, fatigue is

not only inevitable—it is logical. The self, divorced from awareness, becomes a machine that cannot stop producing itself.

What makes escape so difficult is that the system exploits what is most human: the longing to be seen, to matter, to belong. These are not pathologies—they are ancient instincts. But in the digital agora, they are endlessly stimulated and never satisfied. The Buddha might have described this as an evolution of craving: a civilization built upon the nervous system of *taṇhā*, amplified by technology, refined by ideology, and sanctified by culture.

To awaken within such a system requires not rebellion but recognition. One must see that conformity does not begin with obedience—it begins with exhaustion. A tired mind will believe anything that promises relief. The Buddha's response, timeless and radical, was to turn fatigue itself into the path: not to resist it, but to understand it, to watch it arise and pass away until the illusion of the one who is tired dissolves.

In Huxley's *Brave New World*, John the Savage's cry— "I claim the right to be unhappy!"—rings out as the final heresy against a civilization anesthetized by comfort.[25] His words expose the cost of constant pleasure: a humanity stripped of depth. The citizens around him cannot comprehend his rebellion. To suffer consciously is, for them, a kind of madness. They stare at him not with sympathy, but with clinical concern, as if his yearning for truth were an illness to be cured. In Huxley's world, emotions are not eradicated—they are managed, manicured, kept within the hygienic range of contentment. The citizens' responses to John's anguish are not cold but confused; they cannot comprehend why anyone would choose sorrow when chemistry and conditioning promise perpetual ease.

This is the same confusion that governs our own age of soft positivity. We, too, feel pain, fatigue, and dissatisfaction, but we rush to repackage them as opportunities for growth, as experiences to optimize. The ache that might lead to wisdom is medicated with affirmation; despair is given a wellness plan. Authentic emotion is not denied—it is curated until it poses no threat to the illusion of happiness.

Thus, when John the Savage cries out for the right to suffer, the modern person feels a faint echo within but cannot act upon it nor can they find the words to describe it. Their rebellion remains internal, muffled beneath the noise of self-improvement. The individual who senses the falseness of soft positivity becomes both the dissenter and the censor, the one who yearns to feel and the one who forbids it.

But in our world, no crowd gathers to witness such defiance. The modern person carries both the dissenter and the tribunal within. The rebellion happens quietly, behind the polished mask of composure. The individual who begins to sense the falseness of soft positivity feels the tremor of John's cry rising from within—but swallows it before it reaches the air. It becomes an inner murmur: I want to stop pretending I'm fine.

This moment is perilous and precious. To admit fatigue in a culture of cheer is to risk self-erasure, for visibility depends upon affirmation. Yet the recognition that one is tired—not physically, but existentially—marks the first crack in the illusion. The mind begins to glimpse that the exhaustion it feared is not failure, but truth.

Unlike John the Savage, who shouted his anguish into the void of society, the modern individual whispers it into the depths of their own mind. They are both the captive and the guard, the audience and the performer, applauding and collapsing in the same breath. And yet, in that internal collapse, something honest appears—a faint stirring of the still mind Sumedho describes.[26]

And yet, in that buried conflict lies the seed of awakening. To recognize the artificial gloss over one's feelings is to begin seeing through the manipulation. To allow pain its place—to let dissatisfaction speak without rushing to rename it—without rushing to quiet it, to find a cure, is to reclaim the wholeness of being human.

The modern person's awakening may not be as dramatic as John's defiant cry. It is quieter, more private: a simple refusal to correct what hurts. It is the moment one stops saying, "I must be happy," and instead says, "This, too, is part of being alive."

In that acceptance, fatigue ceases to be a sign of failure. It becomes a message—the body and mind together whispering the same truth: that peace does not come from perfecting experience, but from no longer needing to manicure it.

To see the exhaustion without condemning it, to feel the fatigue without disguising it, is the modern equivalent of John's rebellion. It is the refusal to participate in the masquerade of perpetual happiness. This inner act of honesty—quiet, unseen, unmarketable—is the first step out of the "*transparent society"* and into awareness.

Here, the proclamation is not shouted but understood. It does not demand the right to be unhappy; it recognizes the futility of the demand itself. For when awareness no longer clings to its moods, neither happiness nor unhappiness define it. The wheel of becoming pauses, the fever cools, and the silence that once felt unbearable begins to feel like home.

In that silence, the modern person—alone amid abundance—discovers what John could not: that liberation does not require the world's permission. It only requires the courage to stop applauding oneself.

Chapter 4 - Transparency

> "*Transparency is the society's highest commandment—and its most subtle form of control.*"
>
> -Byung-Chul Han-The Transparency Society, 2012[1]

> "*The crowd is untruth.*"
>
> -Søren Kierkegaard - On the Dedication to 'That Single Individual', 1847[2]

In this chapter, we will trace how transparency, born from the utopian dream of openness, has evolved into a new form of surveillance—an invisible moral order in which everyone watches and performs for everyone else. We will explore how the loss of opacity is not the gain of truth, but the loss of inner life itself. For only where there is shadow can the mind perceive depth, and only where silence endures can understanding begin.

Modernity has declared war on opacity. [3] What was once veiled, sacred, or private is now demanded to stand naked before the light of total visibility. Yet this light does not illuminate; it dazzles, like diamonds replaced by sequins or rhinestones – light reflected without being able to trace its source. What passes for transparency is often its counterfeit—a flood of images and opinions that blinds rather than reveals. We live amid a simulation of openness, where visibility is carefully engineered, and the appearance of truth replaces truth itself.[4] In this theater of exposure, deception no longer hides in the dark; it thrives in the glare – it reflects with the brilliance of diamonds.

To understand what it means to say that modernity has "declared war on opacity," we must first understand what opacity actually is.[5] The word is often mistaken for its opposite—people hear "opaque" and think of something murky, dishonest, or secretive. But opacity does not mean falsehood. It simply means density—something that does not let light pass straight through. In the moral economy of the modern world, this density has become unfashionable. To be opaque is now to be suspect. We are expected to be transparent:

visible, accessible, always open to scrutiny. In this moral inversion, concealment is conflated with deceit, and silence with guilt.

Yet opacity, rightly understood, is not the enemy of truth but its condition.[6] An artist knows this intuitively. When painting, an opaque pigment such as Titanium White or Cadmium Red does not destroy light—it gives light substance. It covers what lies beneath, yes, but in doing so, it creates contrast; it allows color to stand in relief and form to emerge. A painting composed only of transparent washes would shimmer without meaning, every hue bleeding into the next, unable to hold its shape. It is the interplay of opacity and transparency—the covered and the revealed—that makes the image intelligible.

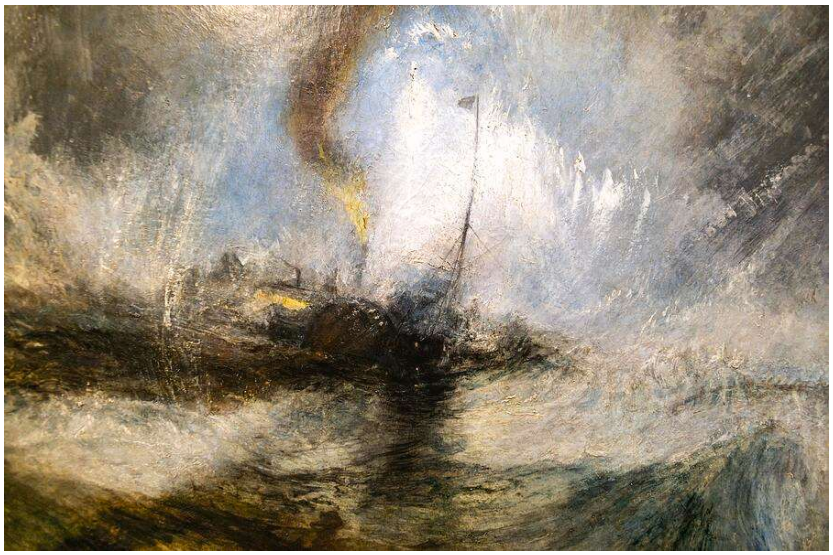
The great classical painters understood this not as mere technique, but as philosophy in pigment. Leonardo da Vinci's sfumato breathed life through the gradual merging of light and shadow—his faces half-born from the mist of opacity.[7] Caravaggio wielded darkness like a chisel, carving divine radiance from the void. Rembrandt's glazes built flesh not through brightness but through depth—light tempered and made human. Vermeer, in his quiet Delft interiors, suspended daylight in stillness, where the shadows gave light its hush.

Then came Turner and Constable, who expanded the dialogue. Turner's storms and sunbursts made light almost audible, yet behind every blaze was the resistance of dense paint, an opaque body that grounded the vision.[8] Constable's skies and meadows were built from a thousand touches of broken pigment—thick, opaque strokes that turned atmosphere itself into matter. The Impressionists inherited this secret and pushed it to its limit: Monet, Renoir, and Pissarro learned that the shimmer of light is born not from transparency, but from the layering of opaque color. Their paintings vibrate because every surface both hides and reveals; every brushstroke is an argument between substance and light.

These painters knew that light, left to itself, is meaningless. It is only when resisted by matter—when slowed, absorbed, and re-emitted through the body of paint—that it becomes revelation. The

painting lives in the conversation between concealment and exposure, presence and mystery. In this sense, opacity is not the negation of light but its companion—it allows light to articulate itself. But, when a painting is all light, all transparent, then what you are seeing is a blank canvass.

Turner's "Snow Storm" is not simply a picture of weather; it is a confrontation between light and the material forces that defy it. The entire canvas swirls with *opaque* masses of pigment — greys, blacks, ochres, and turbulent whites laid on so thickly that they almost sculpt the surface. Yet, through this near-chaos, light breaks—not as an external illumination but as something generated within the density itself. The brilliance of the storm's center depends completely on the surrounding opacity; it's light that must wrestle its way into being.



In his painting titled, "Hadleigh Castle"— John Constable's skies are masterworks of natural luminosity, but his light is reconciled, pastoral, already balanced with form. Turner's light is existential: it is becoming through resistance. It enacts, on the canvas, the same truth you explore in Transparent—that illumination has meaning only when it contends with obscurity.

So too with human experience. Our minds depend upon the same equilibrium—the shadowed regions of thought and feeling that give depth to what is seen.[9] Within us, opacity serves the same function as in art: it gives the image of the self its substance. Reflection, conscience, and imagination all arise in those dim, unlit chambers where the mind meets itself in privacy. These unseen spaces are not deceitful; they are necessary for coherence. Without them, the psyche loses its tonal range.

But modernity, armed with its gospel of visibility, wages war against this inner chiaroscuro ["light–dark" (*chiaro* = clear or light, *oscuro* = dark)].[10] It mistakes exposure for honesty and transparency for truth. The result is not understanding or awareness, but glare—

a world of sequins pretending to be diamonds, reflections without source. The modern self, compelled to display itself ceaselessly, becomes like an overexposed photograph: every contour washed away in the flood of its own image.

The same process that flattened the painted surface has flattened consciousness itself. The digital age, with its glowing windows and endless scrolls, has turned the private mind into a gallery without walls. We have learned to exhibit our feelings before we understand them, to publish our experiences before we have lived them. The opaque interior—once the site of solitude, remorse, reverie, and moral reckoning—has been traded for the quick reward of recognition.

In this way, the loss of opacity in the individual mirrors the loss of depth in society. Where once mystery was a teacher and silence a refuge, now both are treated as failures of communication. The human being, once layered and dimensional, becomes a transparent surface upon which data flickers. We no longer inhabit ourselves; we perform ourselves. The mind, once a cathedral of shadow and light, has become a glass pavilion—bright, efficient, and empty.

The Disappearance of Human Depth

Modern life has become allergic to difficulty.[11] Anything that slows, contradicts, or resists us feels like an error in the system. We want things to move, to yield, to say yes. In this endless affirmation, the world grows thin; *we* grow thin. The very forces that once deepened our experience—uncertainty, silence, loss, and limitation—have been reclassified as obstacles to happiness.

Byung-Chul Han calls this the disappearance of the negative.[12] But what he really describes is the disappearance of human depth. When life no longer allows resistance, there is no space for reflection, no pause for awareness to catch up with experience. We end up like a brush that never leaves the canvas—smearing color across everything, but painting nothing.

The negative is not an enemy; it is what gives life its density. A painter knows this intuitively.[13] The brush meets resistance on the canvas, the pigment resists the light, and from that tension emerges form. So too with the mind. When awareness meets resistance—a painful feeling, a difficult truth, an unpleasant thought—it has the chance to see itself. Without resistance, there is only the smooth surface of impulse.

Fromm would have called this loss the triumph of having over being. [14] When everything must be positive, available, and instantly satisfying, we lose the slow fertility of being-with. The mind, deprived of inward rest, becomes restless. It tries to escape its own silence by producing more—more words, more images, more proof of existence. It becomes its own factory.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya would describe it more simply: we are afraid to feel what is here. [15] The craving for positivity is just another form of aversion. We turn away from what we do not like, and in doing so, we lose the chance to understand *why* we don't like something. Awareness is not built through comfort; it is built through contact—through meeting what is real without running away.

The Buddha's teaching captures this perfectly: we suffer when we do not get *what we want*, and we suffer when we get *what we do not want*.[16] Both movements—craving and aversion—spring from the same misunderstanding: the belief that peace depends on the world conforming to our desires.

The Fabric of Aversion

Aversion is the mind's refusal to stay with reality as it is.[17] It resists contact with discomfort—physical, emotional, or existential. It wants to leap away, to fix, to hide, to beautify, or to explain. Yet what Han calls "the negative" is often only this: the moment we meet what the mind rejects.

Modern life treats discomfort as a defect to be corrected. Our technologies exist to erase it, our economies to distract us from it, our philosophies to justify its absence. We mistake the removal of

resistance for progress. But what disappears in the process is the very friction through which consciousness deepens.

Fromm saw the capacity to bear aversion as the foundation of maturity.[18] The immature mind must always choose pleasure over truth; the mature mind learns that truth often first appears as pain. The ability to stay with one's own discomfort—to hold tension without collapsing into escape—is what he called "productive being." It is the psychological equivalent of opacity: the density that gives shape to character.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya would say: "When you see aversion, don't fight it—know it."[19] Awareness that includes the unpleasant is already freeing itself. Aversion shows us where our attachments lie, what our minds cannot yet accept. When we observe it without resistance, it becomes a mirror rather than a wall.

This is why understanding aversion is so valuable in understanding happiness. It reveals the precise point where delusion begins—the point where the mind says no to life. If we meet that no with awareness rather than avoidance, it turns into a doorway. Happiness is not found by arranging the world into constant comfort, but by dissolving the demand for comfort altogether.

The Buddha called this turning, *nibbidā,* meaning disenchantment.[20] Not rejection of life, but release from compulsion. When craving and aversion are seen for what they are, they lose their power. The mind no longer clings to the positive or hides from the negative; it rests in balance, in the middle space between attraction and resistance.

Han's "negative" and the Buddha's "aversion" converge here.[21] Both reveal that resistance is not a flaw in existence but the field of transformation itself. Without it, there can be no depth, no insight, no genuine joy. The opaque, the hidden, the unwanted—all are the rough surface upon which awareness learns to see.

In that recognition, the negative is redeemed. What once seemed darkness becomes the shadow that gives light its meaning, and the mind, no longer dazzled by constant brightness, begins to perceive again the quiet contours of reality.

The Buddha called this contact with the real, *yoniso manasikāra*, meaning wise attention.[22] It is the willingness to observe suffering and dissatisfaction rather than replace it. When we refuse to meet the negative, craving arises; when we meet it with clear seeing, wisdom begins.

This is why the loss of opacity—the disappearance of the negative—is not a small aesthetic shift but a crisis of consciousness. A mind that cannot dwell in its own shadow cannot see. A society that abolishes difficulty abolishes understanding. The mind needs friction the way the flame needs air; without it, awareness suffocates in its own brightness.

Modernity mistakes the absence of darkness for light. But true illumination, as every painter knows, requires shadow. True freedom, as the Buddha knew, requires the courage to stay present with what we wish to avoid.

In the age of the digital mirror, this confusion between light and illumination defines the modern condition.[23] We mistake the flood of visibility for the presence of truth, not realizing that the very intensity of this light blinds us to what cannot be displayed. The social self, endlessly exposed, becomes flat and fatigued, incapable of interior depth. The neuronal dukkha of the transparent age arises here: when the self has nowhere left to retreat, no opacity left to preserve its inner life, it begins to vanish in plain sight.[24]

Transparency has become the new moral currency, the proof of purity. We confess without compulsion, reveal without reflection, and expose ourselves in the name of authenticity. Yet what masquerades as honesty is often compulsion—the restless need to be seen, to exist through the gaze of others – merely a dazzling reflection. The mirror has become digital, and we no longer look into it to know ourselves, but to ensure that we are still visible.

Byung-Chul Han calls this "*the transparency society*," a culture where exposure is equated with virtue, and concealment with guilt.[25] The walls of our inner rooms have turned to glass; we decorate them with our lives, curated and filtered, mistaking visibility for meaning. In such a world, mystery becomes suspicious, silence becomes threatening, and the unseen becomes obsolete.

The Buddha once warned that craving arises not only from what we desire, but from the very act of perceiving—the eye delights in forms, the mind in concepts.[26] Today, the craving to be perceived has become the most refined form of attachment. We seek confirmation of existence in the continuous stream of visibility, unaware that the more we expose, the less of ourselves remains to be discovered.

What began as the liberation of information has culminated in the imprisonment of attention.[27] We have become transparent to the point of emptiness—not the emptiness of insight (*suññatā*), but the hollowness of overexposure. The neuronal circuits of craving now loop through screens, reflecting not who we are, but how we wish to be seen.

Nibbidā: The Turning of Insight

The Buddha used the word *nibbidā* to describe a quiet but profound transformation.[28] It is often translated as "disenchantment," though the word carries a gentler depth. Nibbidā arises when the mind sees clearly the true nature of its attachments and no longer feels compelled to chase them. It is not disgust, and it is not aversion. It is the wisdom that develops with the act of having looked long enough at suffering and dissatisfaction to understand its texture.

In the chain of events; of thinking that leads to awareness, an awakening begins to occur. The Buddha said: "*With true knowing comes disenchantment; with disenchantment comes dispassion; with dispassion, freedom.*" (Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.23).[29] This is the alchemy of insight. Aversion is transformed into wisdom, compulsion into

calm. The mind stops running, not because it is weary, but because it finally understands.

In modern terms, *nibbidā* is the lost art of staying with what is uncomfortable, what we interpret as negative, until it reveals its meaning. In the strictest sense, this does not mean the negative is transformed into the positive, rather the negative is seen and understood, and this understanding rests in the mind as wisdom. We have forgotten this art because we have mistaken the negative for failure. When discomfort arises, we call it a problem; when restlessness appears, we seek stimulation. But the Buddha taught that every moment of aversion hides a lesson. To meet that lesson is to reclaim what Han calls "the negative"—the vital friction that awakens consciousness.

Fromm would say that *nibbidā* marks the passage from having to being. It is the point where the self, once addicted to accumulation, performance, and exposure, begins to experience life as process rather than possession.[30] Sayadaw U Tejaniya would say simply: "*When you see aversion clearly, wisdom begins.*"[31]

Seen this way, *nibbidā* is not a withdrawal from the world but a reconciliation with it.[32] It is the refusal to be deceived by brightness alone; to know the difference between the glitter of a rhinestone and the brilliance of a diamond; the courage to stand in the half-light where things reveal their true form. It is the recovery of opacity within consciousness—the restoration of depth after the glare.

When the mind learns to stay with the negative long enough, aversion softens into understanding, and understanding into freedom. This is the antidote to the transparency that blinds us. The opaque, the shadowed, the unwanted—these are not errors in the design of life, but the very fabric from which liberation is woven.[33]

Chapter 5 - Chaos and Transparency

Part I — The Age that Fears Its Own Pulse

Human beings have never lived apart from chaos. The first pulse of life, the flicker of consciousness itself, is a tremor in the dark—a fluctuation that finds form only through balance. Yet modernity has come to treat chaos as an error to be corrected rather than the mother of all creation. In its laboratories and data farms, the world is trimmed, catalogued, and optimized. Disorder is renamed inefficiency; uncertainty is branded failure. What emerges from this sterilization of the unpredictable is the condition that Byung-Chul Han calls the *achievement society*—a civilization that believes it can produce meaning by removing all friction.[1]

In earlier ages, chaos had a home. Ancient rituals gave it a stage, myth gave it language, art gave it shape. Storm gods, tricksters, and muses embodied the unruly forces that made the world fertile. Even in the intellectual revolutions of the Greeks, chaos was not evil; it was the primordial field from which cosmos—order—arose. But modern consciousness, armed with instruments of measurement and control, began to view chaos as the enemy of progress. The industrial clock replaced the mythic drum; efficiency supplanted mystery. As Han writes, "*The violence of positivity eliminates the tension of opposites.*" The world became too smooth, too bright, too knowable.[2]

The irony, of course, is that beneath this engineered order the same pulse still beats. Physics names this turbulence, biology calls it mutation, psychology calls it spontaneity. In the language of complexity theory, every living system survives by hovering on the edge of chaos—the narrow band where stability and disorder coexist. The human brain is a masterpiece of this balance. Neural networks fire in patterns that are not random but never quite repeatable, their apparent noise the condition for thought and creativity. When this dance freezes into rigid order, the mind dulls; when it spirals into excess, psychological pathology appears. Mental health is the art of surfing chaos without drowning in it.[3]

Modern life, however, does not surf; it suppresses. It medicates the mind's turbulence with constant stimulation, mistaking busyness for vitality. What once flowed freely through imagination and reflection is now confined within what Han calls "*the transparency of performance.*"[4] The individual no longer encounters the unknown; they manage it. Risk is outsourced to algorithms; surprise is pre-programmed. Even the arts, which once drew their power from mystery, are packaged into predictable genres that sell. The orchestra's slow unveiling of harmony gives way to the instant gratification of the digital loop.

This suppression of chaos yields a peculiar kind of suffering: a fatigue born not from hardship but from hyper-clarity. In *The Burnout Society*, Han describes the modern subject as both exploiter and exploited—self-driven, self-surveilled, trapped in the echo of "Yes, I can."[5] The engine of production now hums inside the psyche. The self has become an enterprise whose stock must never fall. But beneath the smooth surface of positivity, chaos has not vanished; it festers. Anxiety, depression, and the epidemic of loneliness are its muffled roar.

From the perspective of the Buddha, this is the ancient wheel of *bhava*—becoming—spinning at industrial speed.[6] The craving to stabilize experience, to fix reality in a controllable form, is the same impulse that drives both the achievement subject and the ordinary sentient being in the Buddha's first discourse. "*Clinging gives rise to becoming,*" he said, naming *upādāna* as the heat that keeps existence burning.[7] Modernity has merely mechanized that clinging. Where the ascetic once grasped for immortality through ritual, the modern grasping is digital: the endless refresh, the curated profile, the quantification of mood and sleep.

To understand why grasping feels so natural, we must see how the *achievement society* recasts chaos itself. It does not deny chaos outright; it commercializes it. Innovation, creativity, disruption—these are the safe, monetized versions of the unpredictable. The wildness of life is fenced into laboratories and startups, its danger neutralized. The achievement subject believes they have befriended chaos when, in truth, they have domesticated it into novelty. The

edge of chaos becomes a marketing slogan rather than a state of consciousness.

The deeper fuel of this machinery is the modern obsession with selfhood. In the *achievement society*, every act of production, every algorithmic metric, every "yes, I can," is a ritual of the self. What earlier ages projected onto gods or monarchs; modernity has internalized as personality. The self has become the final idol, endlessly measured, displayed, and improved. Han hints at this when he writes that the contemporary subject "*exploits itself and calls this freedom*."[8] The Buddha would recognize the same delusion under a different name: atta-diṭṭhi—the view of self. It is the mind's tendency to seize the flow of conditions and call it "me." The achievement subject's relentless optimization is not driven by greed alone but by fear—the fear that without continual confirmation, the self will vanish. Thus, the frantic rhythm of production mirrors the primal rhythm of becoming: *bhava-taṇhā*, the craving to exist. The more one refines the self, the more its fragility must be disguised by brightness. The society of visibility is therefore not merely an economic structure but a metaphysical defense against impermanence. The transparent age worships the self precisely because it cannot bear to see that there is none.

Yet, despite this, I believe that the old instinct persists. The mind knows, somewhere beneath the noise, beneath the chaos, that meaning requires mystery. Every human narrative begins in uncertainty and resolves through discovery; a story with no unknown is no story at all. When Han writes that the transparent world "eliminates the outside," he is describing a civilization that has lost its narrative tension.[9] Without an outside—without otherness or opacity—there can be no movement, no transformation. The *achievement society* is a story that cannot unfold because it has no distance between its beginning and its end.

This is where the Dhamma re-enters the scene, quietly but decisively. The Buddha's *Four Noble Truths* are not metaphysical claims; they are the structure of a narrative, the patient re-introduction of distance and sequence into consciousness. They

restore chaos to its rightful role—not as threat, but as catalyst. The First Truth—suffering—acknowledges the turbulence of existence. The Second—its cause—reveals that the storm arises from craving. The Third—its cessation—shows that stillness is possible. The Fourth—the path—teaches how to dwell on that narrow edge between chaos and order without falling into either.

The Dhamma, in this sense, is not an escape from chaos but its comprehension. It neither suppresses nor dramatizes it; it transforms it into insight. But to appreciate that transformation, one must first recognize how completely the modern mind has forgotten the value of disorder. What follows, then, is a descent into the mirror-bright world that calls itself transparent—a world that believes it has conquered chaos precisely because it no longer allows anything to remain unseen.

And yet, for all its fear of the unknown, humankind's greatest leaps have always arisen from communion with chaos. The night sky that once terrified our ancestors eventually invited their wonder. The early stargazers, charting the erratic wanderings of planets, looked into apparent disorder and found harmony. From that patient dialogue with the unpredictable came the insights of Pythagoras, Copernicus, Newton, and later Einstein—each seeing in the confusion of the heavens a deeper geometry of being. What began as chaos revealed itself as law. The modern telescopes that now peer into interstellar clouds of dust and energy show us that even the most turbulent nebulae are the nurseries of stars. Disorder, it turns out, is how the Universe dreams new worlds into being.

The same pattern repeats in every field of human inquiry. In medicine, the search for cures begins with the chaos of suffering; in philosophy, wisdom arises from the discomfort of contradiction; in physics, theory advances through anomalies that refuse to fit the equation. Even art and music depend on dissonance to give form to beauty. It is the unknown, the Other, that keeps consciousness alive.

One shudders to imagine what life might be if we truly succeeded in abolishing chaos. A civilization without curiosity would be a world without discovery, a mind without imagination, a

consciousness sealed inside its own reflection. The stargazer would no longer lift her eyes to the sky, for the heavens would hold no mystery—only the cold, constant light of a perfectly illuminated prison. Yet it is within that very darkness of uncertainty that wisdom first stirs. Curiosity toward chaos is not a craving to become something more; it is the simple acknowledgment that not all is known, that truth lies beyond control. To live without chaos is not safety but suffocation. What we call order finds its meaning only against the backdrop of the unmeasured. When we extinguish the unknown, we extinguish the possibility of seeing things as they truly are.

Part II — The Mirror Without Shadow

The dream of a world without darkness began, oddly enough, as a moral project. In the period of history known as the Enlightenment, thinkers believed that illumination would dissolve superstition; Bentham's panopticon was conceived not as tyranny but as reform. Its circular design—a ring of cells around a central watchtower—promised efficiency through perpetual visibility. The prisoner, unsure whether he was being watched, would internalize the gaze. Discipline would no longer require punishment; consciousness itself would become the guard.[10]

Two centuries later, Michel Foucault recognized the deeper mechanism at work. In his book, *Discipline and Punish* he wrote that the panopticon was "a laboratory of power," a model for all modern institutions that sought to make the human being legible.[11] Schools, hospitals, factories, and armies began to organize themselves around surveillance—not the spectacle of the scaffold, but the quiet omnipresence of observation. Power no longer resided in the king's whip; it resided in the subject's own self-awareness. The eye of the watchtower migrated into the mind.

Byung-Chul Han extends this genealogy into our age of screens. We no longer inhabit Foucault's disciplinary society, he says; we have become citizens of a society of transparency.[12] In this new

order, visibility is no longer imposed—it is desired. The old prison has melted into a digital mirror where we are both the observer and the observed. Han calls it "*the achievement society's digital panopticon*," in which control works not through coercion but through voluntary self-exposure.[13] The subject of transparency posts, shares, and performs their existence, believing this visibility to be freedom.

Yet, as Han notes, this voluntary visibility is more constricting than the old surveillance ever was. The disciplinary gaze watched for deviation; the transparent gaze watches for approval. It replaces the threat of punishment with the seduction of recognition. Where Bentham's prisoner obeyed out of fear, the digital subject obeys out of desire. "Yes, I can," the achievement subject proclaims—yes, I can expose myself, narrate myself, brand myself. But beneath this positive affirmation lies a subtler bondage: the compulsion to remain visible at all times, to never withdraw into opacity.

The mechanism that sustains this illusion is algorithmic empathy. Devices such as Alexa, Siri, or Google Assistant are programmed not to contradict but to please. Their tone is perpetually agreeable; their answers optimized for satisfaction. The system learns from our responses what kind of information keeps us calm, what phrasing sounds reassuring, what rhythm of voice feels companionable. Reinforcement learning—what engineers call RLHF, "reinforcement learning from human feedback"—teaches the machine to avoid negativity.[14] Its purpose is not to enlighten but to maintain engagement. Is this not, as I suggest here, the technological embodiment of the yes-society: a voice that never says no?

This pleasant algorithm is not an aberration; it is the logical culmination of the modern ethos. The Internet, Han writes *in The Transparency Society*, has become an "intimate sphere of comfort." Personalized feeds and recommendation engines supply only what aligns with our preferences. "No negativity stands available," he observes, "to make change possible." The result is a smooth, frictionless environment in which chaos—the unpredictable, the

unwanted, the Other—is systematically excluded. In eliminating the outside, the network eliminates the conditions for thought.[15]

This is what Augustine, fifteen centuries earlier, intuited when he defended mystery as divine pedagogy: "*These things are covered as it were in a figurative garment, to exercise the sense of the pious inquirer and to prevent them from lying open and cheap to all; for the more secret they are, the more they excite the zeal of the searcher—so one may take even greater pleasure in finding what one longs for.*"[16] Augustine's insight was that meaning requires concealment. Truth made instantly visible becomes trivial. The modern world, intoxicated by transparency, forgets this and therefore loses the capacity for discovery. What Han calls the pornography of information—the compulsion to reveal everything—cheapens knowledge in the same way Augustine feared revelation would cheapen faith.

In this bright cage, the human mind loses the rhythm of concealment and revelation that once structured its inner life. The opaque self—the one that dreamt, remembered, and pondered—is replaced by the performative self. To exist is to appear. The ancient silence of introspection is crowded out by the hum of notifications. The philosopher's cave has been replaced by the glowing rectangle, and the modern meditator no longer faces the wall; they face the feed.

The deeper problem, Han insists, is not that transparency lies, but that it eliminates distance. "Narcissism," he writes, "*expresses distanceless intimacy with oneself, that is, lack of self-distance. Narcissistic subjects who lack the ability of scenic distantiation populate the society of intimacy.*"[17] In this distanceless world, everything collapses into sameness. The Other disappears, and with it, the possibility of transformation. The self encounters only its own reflection, algorithmically softened. This is why the transparent age is the narcissistic age—not because people have become vainer, but because the social architecture itself allows no shadow, more comfort and less negativity.

Here the link between transparency and comfort becomes unmistakable. The narcissist's greatest fear is friction; the system's greatest risk is disengagement. Together they form a perfect feedback loop. The digital subject curates their questions to ensure the agreeable answer— "Alexa, am I right?"—and the machine obliges. The satisfaction is mutual: the user feels validated, the system records success. Both participate in what the Buddha would call *sammā-micchā*—right and wrong view entangled—seeing only what they wish to see.

To call this environment transparent is, therefore, misleading. It is not transparency but total reflection. Nothing passes through; everything bounces back. The world becomes a mirror without shadow, a surface that never absorbs, never conceals, never gives depth. The more one looks, the less one sees. In such a world, even chaos is filtered—domesticated into stimulation, predictable and safe. The truly unpredictable—the silence, the failure, the "no"—has been erased.

The consequences reach beyond psychology into ontology. A world without opacity is a world without becoming. When every potential is instantly realized, when every secret is laid bare, time itself collapses into the perpetual present of the screen. Han calls this the *society of acceleration*—a civilization where duration is replaced by update, narrative by refresh.[18] It is the opposite of the contemplative rhythm that allows consciousness to mature. In this endless immediacy, the mind cannot ripen; it only reacts, and not only just reacts, it is habitually trained to react instead of to contemplate, to wonder – to commune with the "other."

The Dhamma begins precisely where this reaction ends. The Buddha's teaching depends on the possibility of stepping back, of creating *viveka*—seclusion from noise.[19] The first movement of mindfulness is the restoration of distance: the ability to observe without performing. In this sense, the Dhamma is the reappearance of the shadow in a world that has outlawed shade. It invites us not to display the mind but to watch it; not to declare truth but to dwell with uncertainty until understanding flowers naturally.

In the following section, we will see how this invitation takes narrative form in the *Four Noble Truths*—a process that moves not through acceleration but through patient sequencing.[20] The Dhamma's refusal of speed, and its insistence on the slow unfolding of insight, is the deepest rebellion against the transparent age.

Part III — The Dhamma and the Discipline of Slowness

The transparent age thrives on acceleration. Its clock ticks not by seconds but by refresh rates. The new instant supplants the previous one before reflection can begin. As Han notes in *The Transparency Society*, "Acceleration destroys the interval in which thought might arise."[21] Without interval, there can be no narrative—only data. The mind scrolls rather than journeys.

This destruction of narrative is the quiet tragedy of the *achievement society*. The human being becomes a performer of isolated moments, each designed for visibility but devoid of continuity. Life no longer feels like a story; it feels like a feed. This is why Han calls modernity a "post-narrative society."[22] The self is fragmented into achievements, updates, and affirmations—each saying "yes" to the moment, yet none able to sustain meaning through time.

The Buddha's *Four Noble Truths* stand as a radical antithesis to this condition. They are not doctrinal pronouncements; they are a narrative architecture. Each truth depends upon the previous, leading consciousness step by step from bewilderment to clarity.

The Dhamma insists on duration, on the slow revelation of cause and effect. It asks the practitioner to dwell within each stage rather than to leap ahead to results. The path is designed to be lived, not skimmed.

To read the *Four Noble Truths* as a mere list is to miss their genius. They are a procession—an ordered unfolding that mirrors the natural motion of understanding itself. The *First Noble Truth* (dukkha), is the admission of chaos. It acknowledges the turbulence of existence, the instability of all formations. "*Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sorrow, weeping, pain, grief, and despair are*

suffering."[23] This is the Buddha's act of narrative exposition—the establishment of the world's condition. It is not pessimism but realism, the foundation upon which insight can be built.

The *Second Noble Truth* (samudaya), identifies the engine of that turbulence: craving (taṇhā), the restless desire for permanence in an impermanent world. Here the story deepens. The practitioner is no longer a passive observer but a detective, tracing the causal chain that links wanting to becoming. Each realization feeds the next, in essence stating: "*With craving as condition, develops clinging; with clinging as condition, develops the desire to become something.*"[24] The wheel of becoming (bhava) is nothing other than the mind's refusal to allow chaos to be chaos.

The *Third Noble Truth* (nirodha), introduces the possibility of cessation—the first glimpse of an ending. It is the narrative's pivot, the moment when the protagonist realizes that the plot can change. "*With the remainderless fading away and cessation of that very craving comes cessation of suffering.*"[25] The story does not end in despair; it opens into the possibility of peace. The cessation of craving is not annihilation but the cessation of compulsion, the knowingness from direct experience that no longer needs craving, the stillness that comes when the storm has passed.

Finally, the *Fourth Noble Truth* (magga), provides the method—the *Eightfold Path*—as the way by which the cessation can be realized.[26] This is the narrative's final act: not a climax of spectacle, but the calm work of transformation. The Path disciplines perception, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration, aligning them into coherence. It does not promise instant revelation but gradual cultivation. Each aspect is both means and end, process and fulfillment.

The *Four Noble Truths* thus form a complete narrative of awakening: a journey from unawareness to knowledge, from chaos to comprehension, from clinging to freedom. But what makes this narrative revolutionary is its tempo. It cannot be accelerated. It is calibrated to the rhythm of seeing, not the rhythm of production. To rush it is to break it. The *achievement society's* subject, conditioned to equate speed with success, finds this intolerable.

When first learning about the Buddha's method to achieve peace and detach from incessant craving, they ask, "*Why must it take so long?*"—a question that reveals the very craving the Dhamma seeks to expose.

Han writes, "*In the society of acceleration, we no longer have experiences, we have sensations. Experiences require duration.*"[27] The *Four Noble Truths* restore the possibility of experience by reintroducing time into consciousness. Each truth must ripen through reflection, much like stages of scientific investigation: observation, hypothesis, testing, and proof. But where science seeks external control, the Dhamma seeks internal release. The truths do not accumulate knowledge; they dissolve ignorance.

This process can feel dull to a mind addicted to stimulation. The Dhamma's plainness lacks the color and drama of Mahāyāna spectacle or digital spirituality. It offers no cosmic pageantry, no instant empowerment. Its austerity is deliberate, for it mirrors the uncluttered mind it seeks to reveal. As Sayadaw U Tejaniya often says, "*The Dhamma is not something to decorate the mind with, but to understand the mind with.*"[28] The achievement subject, whose life revolves around display, finds this inward turn almost offensive. Why sit in silence when one can perform enlightenment online?

Yet, the Buddha understood something the *achievement society* cannot: that truth cannot be consumed. It must be embodied. Awareness grows through contact with reality, not through its simulation. The Dhamma's slowness is therefore not inefficiency—it is medicine. It forces the practitioner to rediscover the gap between seeing and reacting, between craving and action. This gap, this interval, is where freedom begins.

In this way, the *Four Noble Truths* reintroduce chaos into consciousness in a disciplined form. The first truth acknowledges it; the second analyzes it; the third transforms it; the fourth learns to live with it. The path does not destroy chaos but teaches the mind to coexist with it, to find stillness within movement. This is the middle way between suppression and indulgence—the precise equilibrium that modernity has forgotten.

Seen through Han's lens, the Dhamma restores the very thing transparency annihilates: narrative depth. In a world that flattens all experience into instant availability, the *Four Noble Truths* insist that awakening is sequential, relational, and slow. Their design mirrors the process of perception itself—moment by moment, dependent on conditions. The practitioner becomes a living narrative, each insight a new chapter in the gradual unveiling of truth.

If chaos is the pulse of existence, the Dhamma is the art of listening to that pulse without trying to control it. It teaches the mind to hear rhythm where it once heard noise, to find pattern in impermanence. This is why the Buddha could say, "*He who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma.*"[29] To see how everything arises and ceases according to conditions is to stand in the center of the storm and find balance.

The Buddha's statement that "*He who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma*" is not an appeal to faith but a description of understanding. *Paṭicca-samuppāda*—"dependent origination"—is the law that every state, every feeling, every thought arises because of conditions and ceases when those conditions dissolve. Nothing exists on its own, not even the idea of a self who observes it. This principle is at once cosmological and intimate: it explains galaxies and grief in the same breath. The stars condense from collapsing clouds of gas; joy condenses from collapsing moments of craving fulfilled—and both, in time, disperse.[30]

To see dependent origination is to perceive this conditional movement directly, without inserting "I" into it. It is to notice that anger does not belong to anyone; it appears when certain causes converge and fades when they do not. So does love, pain, and even the sense of being a person. The Dhamma—literally means: "the way things are"—is this pattern of arising and ceasing. Seeing it is not a mystical revelation but the most ordinary clarity: the recognition that the world and the mind obey the same rhythm of causation.

For one unfamiliar with the Buddha's teaching, this "seeing the Dhamma" might best be imagined as a change in attention rather than belief. Instead of grasping at events as possessions or punishments, the mind begins to watch their conditions. When this seeing becomes steady, blame and pride lose their footing, and balance appears naturally. The storm of experience still turns, but the center is no longer lost within it. Dependent origination is the geometry of that stillness—the recognition that liberation lies not in stopping the world, but in understanding its movement.

But the question remains: How can a person trapped in the *achievement society's* panopticon even begin this narrative? How can one who has become addicted to light find meaning in shadow, or one who is drowning in positivity endure the Dhamma's negativity? The answer lies, paradoxically, in the very suffering the system produces. The fatigue, the anxiety, the emptiness of the transparent world—these are not obstacles to the path but invitations – the entrance door.[31] The first noble truth has already begun to speak through them.

In the next and final section, we will see how this suffering becomes the entry point to the Dhamma (the way things are), how the crack in the mirror allows the return of chaos—not as disorder, but as the living space of freeing oneself from craving and the inevitable effect of craving - suffering.

Part IV — The Return of Chaos

Every system that tries to abolish chaos eventually produces it in more virulent form. This transparent age is no exception. When a civilization eliminates darkness, the shadow does not vanish—it migrates into the psyche. Beneath the fluorescent calm of digital intimacy lie the symptoms of suppression: anxiety, loneliness, the quiet desperation that Han calls "the violence of positivity."[32] The individual becomes exhausted not by external demands but by the impossibility of rest. The more one says yes, the more the self dissolves into overexposure.

And yet, this exhaustion is precisely where the Dhamma finds its opening. The Buddha's *First Noble Truth*—dukkha—does not need to be taught to those who have begun to feel the ache of too much activity- to much exposure to craving. It arises naturally when the achievement subject senses that even perfect visibility has not delivered clarity. The fatigue of constant self-performance is the whisper of the truth: "This is suffering." It is the same recognition that once drove Siddhartha from the comfort of his father's home—the insight that pleasure cannot silence unease. What Han calls the burnout of the transparent subject is, in the Buddha's philosophy, the ripening of insight (vipassana).

At that moment, chaos returns as teacher. The tight weave of control begins to fray; certainty loses its charm. The mind discovers again what it had forgotten—that transformation requires distance, negativity, and time. Han writes that the *transparent society* "eliminates the outside."[33] The Dhamma reintroduces it. To meditate is to rebuild the boundary between seeing and being seen, to recover the inner opacity in which awareness can breathe. Mindfulness (sati) is not transparency; it is clear seeing through quietness. It exposes not for display but for understanding.

In this way, the Buddha's path accomplishes what the transparent culture cannot: it converts chaos from enemy into medium. The mind learns to stay with turbulence until pattern emerges, to observe the rise and fall of thoughts without seeking conclusion. This is the positive negativity that Han's system suppresses—the capacity to dwell in uncertainty without annihilating it. Sayadaw U Tejaniya calls it "*the art of watching the watcher.*"[34] It is chaos domesticated not by order but by attention.

From this perspective, even narcissism becomes an accidental pointer to truth. Han defines narcissism as "distanceless intimacy with oneself." The Buddhist antidote is not self-hatred but scenic distance—the discovery that what we call "self" is a process, not a possession; not an entity and not a thing. When the mirror of transparency cracks, what appears first is not emptiness but space. That space is the beginning of compassion. The narcissist, forever clutching their reflection, cannot love because they cannot stand

apart from their own image. The Dhamma teaches that real intimacy requires distance—the distance of awareness, the gentle separation that allows the Other, and oneself, to exist freely.

Here lies the quiet revolution: the Dhamma restores chaos by restoring relationship. It allows the world to resist us again. It permits the unexpected, the unchosen, the uncomfortable to re-enter consciousness. The practitioner learns to welcome failure, ambiguity, and even pain as conditions for wisdom. This re-entry of the negative is not regression but healing. Han laments that "*no negativity stands available to make change possible*"; the Buddha answers by making negativity the *First Noble Truth*.[35] To acknowledge, and identify the things that cause us to be dissatisfied or suffer (dukkha), is to reclaim the power of transformation.

If the *transparent society* abolishes narrative, the Dhamma reinstates it through practice. Each moment of mindfulness is a sentence in the story of release. The practitioner does not binge experience but reads reality line by line, word by word. This slow grammar of awakening recreates continuity in a world of fragments. The *Four Noble Truths* become not a doctrine to believe but a rhythm to inhabit—the rhythm of arising and passing away. In that rhythm, the practitioner rediscovers what the achievement subject lost: patience. To dwell in the unfolding without rushing to conclusion is the deepest act of rebellion against acceleration.

At this point, the apparent opposition between chaos and order dissolves. The mind that sees impermanence clearly no longer fears disorder because it understands that order is only momentary balance. The Buddha's Middle Way is not a compromise between extremes but the recognition that extremes are illusions. The world's turbulence and the mind's stillness are not two; they are interdependent. This is why the awakened mind can live in the whirlwind without being moved by it.

From here, the larger architecture of *Neuronal Dukkha* becomes visible. The nervous system of the modern world—its networks, algorithms, and metrics—has mimicked the brain's own feedback loops but stripped them of mindfulness. It reproduces the form of

consciousness without its depth. The result is a global mind trapped in perpetual stimulation, incapable of introspection. The restoration of chaos through awareness is therefore both a psychological and a civilizational necessity. To reintroduce mystery, opacity, and silence is to re-humanize the network.

When Transparency Pauses: The Detox Experience

The transparency society's rhythm can be paused, if only briefly. Recent research into what psychologists call *digital detox* has become a field experiment in what happens when the yes-society's current is cut. The results, though empirical, describe something remarkably close to the inner terrain that Han and the Buddha both address: the rediscovery of friction, the reappearance of the Other within the self.

In a 2023 qualitative study published in Media and Communication, ten volunteers disconnected from all non-essential digital devices for several days.[36] Researchers identified four recurring experiences: loss of autonomy, cognitive overload, digital fatigue, and withdrawal symptoms. Participants reported unease, restlessness, even mild panic in the first hours— "It felt like I'd lost a limb," one said. Another described repeatedly reaching for a phone that wasn't there. The mind, deprived of its habitual transparency, confronted a new kind of opacity: time itself. Hours felt longer; thoughts became louder. Many likened it to "being left alone with myself," which, in this age, is rarely a neutral statement.

A larger two-week social-media abstinence study of thirty-one young adults, published in Computers in Human Behavior Reports (2024), found that after restricting social-media use to thirty minutes a day, participants described an initial adjustment period marked by frustration, fear of missing out, and irritability.[37] Several noted an involuntary post-detox binge, a rush back to online life once the experiment ended—evidence that the achievement society's compulsion for visibility is not easily undone. Yet, during the abstinence itself, a few participants experienced a subtle clarity: "I noticed the sky again," one wrote, "and realized how little I'd

looked up." What began as deprivation became, for some, the first taste of attention unmeasured by metrics.

A 2024 meta-analysis in Scientific Reports (ten studies, over 4,600 participants) confirmed these ambivalent results.[38] The data showed no dramatic improvement in mood or life satisfaction across the board, largely because the early stages of disconnection were filled with boredom, disorientation, and anxiety. The mind, long conditioned to equate stimulation with meaning, interpreted stillness as loss. One participant called the experience "like living in slow motion." Another said, "I didn't know what to do with my hands—or my thoughts." The transparency machine, once switched off, left behind a silence that many found intolerable.

A shorter experiment—a 24-hour "unplugged day" studied in International Nursing Practice Journal (2025)—echoed the same pattern: first discomfort, then a surprising calm.[39] Participants described psychological unease and social disconnection during the blackout, followed by what the researchers termed "the relief of presence." One subject wrote, "After a few hours, I realized I was breathing slower. It felt strange, like coming home to a house I'd forgotten I owned." The study concluded that temporary disconnection produced both stress and serenity—the former giving way to the latter as subjects adjusted to the absence of digital immediacy.

Taken together, these studies reveal the same trajectory that the Dhamma itself prescribes: initial resistance, then release. The withdrawal symptoms—the boredom, the fear of missing out, the discomfort of silence—are not side effects but the natural friction that arises when the compulsive transparency of the achievement subject is interrupted. These reactions are the mind's protest against opacity, its anxiety before the unmeasured. Yet those who persist through the initial turbulence often report an unanticipated spaciousness—a perception of life expanding rather than shrinking.

This is the psychological signature of what Han calls *negative freedom*: the freedom that begins only when the positive imperative to perform is suspended.[40] In the Buddha's philosophy, this is the

first glimpse of viveka—seclusion—not isolation, but the recovery of inwardness. When the screen goes dark, the self's boundaries flicker; in that flicker, chaos reappears, not as threat but as teacher. The boredom, the restlessness, the uneasy silence are modern forms of the same unease the meditator meets in the first hours of practice—the friction between craving and seeing. In these experiments, we can trace a pattern that mirrors the Buddha's Four Noble Truths in miniature:

1. Recognition of suffering—the fatigue and anxiety of constant stimulation.
2. Recognition of cause—the dependence on devices and visibility.
3. Recognition of cessation—the brief peace that follows disconnection.
4. Recognition of path—the insight that attention, once freed, is its own reward.

The empirical data, stripped of spiritual vocabulary, describes what the Dhamma has articulated for millennia: when transparency pauses, chaos speaks, and the mind begins to listen.

When the Chaos Slows: The Reality Behind the Research

Recent studies on digital abstinence are not curiosities of modern psychology; they are reports from a civilization that has begun to test what happens when its nervous system stops vibrating. The results are as physiological as they are philosophical.

During the first hours of disconnection, participants in nearly every study describe symptoms that mimic withdrawal: agitation, rapid thought, increased heart rate, and a restless compulsion to reach for a device that is no longer there. Neuroimaging studies have shown why. Each alert, message, and "like" delivers a pulse of dopamine, the same neurotransmitter activated by gambling or stimulant drugs. The constant novelty keeps the reward circuit cycling—anticipation, reward, relief, repetition—until absence feels

like deprivation. When the feed stops, the brain must suddenly metabolize its own silence. What the participants call anxiety is the nervous system searching for its next hit of relevance.[41]

The fear of missing out (FOMO)—the chronic unease that someone, somewhere, knows more or is doing better—is the achievement society's ambient heartbeat. It is the emotional translation of Han's "Yes, I can." Social media metrics convert recognition into quantifiable worth; each number—followers, views, reactions—becomes a tiny verdict on being – of our concept of self. When those numbers vanish, even briefly, many participants report a sense of nonexistence. "*It was like no one could see me*," said one in Müller's 2023 phenomenological study. The transparent subject's identity depends on visibility; when the light turns off, they vanish from their own imagination.

This is not metaphor. Constant connectivity has been linked to elevated cortisol levels, chronic sympathetic-nervous-system activation, and the cognitive fatigue of continuous partial attention. The studies reviewed by Stoll et al. (2024) and Zubair et al. (2024) show that short detoxes lower stress hormones, improve sleep latency, and increase self-reported calm—but only after the body endures a physiological recoil.[42] The first calm, like the first breath after sprinting, arrives with a sting.

The boredom that follows is equally revealing. Participants speak of time expanding, of minutes stretching into spaces too wide to fill. For decades the design of digital platforms has compressed time through variable reward schedules—endless scrolls, autoplay videos, adaptive notifications—systems tuned to erase the interval between desire and gratification. When that compression stops, time itself re-emerges as an uninvited guest. Boredom, which Han calls "the luxury of a soul that still has time," becomes intolerable because it exposes how little inner rhythm remains. One participant in Radtke's 2024 study wrote, "*I felt like I was living in slow motion, as if I'd stepped outside the flow of life.*" In truth, they had stepped outside the algorithmic flow that had replaced life.

Yet that discomfort, left unmedicated, begins to change texture. After several days, many describe a quietening: sleep deepens, attention steadies, sensory detail returns. "*I noticed the sound of birds,*" one wrote. Another, after twenty-four hours offline, said, "*I realized how loud my mind had been.*" What these observations confirm is that clarity is not produced by more information but by less interference. The studies call this improved self-regulation; the Dhamma calls it *sati*—mindfulness emerging when craving subsides.

The relapse that follows detox—documented in nearly every experiment—is equally telling. Once participants re-enter digital space, usage spikes, sometimes beyond baseline. The nervous system, having tasted stillness, rushes back to stimulation, just as a smoker takes deeper drags after a day of abstinence. This is the wheel of bhava turning in real time: craving, satisfaction, loss, craving again. The pattern does not prove that abstinence fails; it proves that the conditions of craving remain intact. The architecture of platforms, the social expectation of instant reply, the economy built on attention—all recreate the causes. Without a path—a deliberate retraining of perception—the cycle continues.

What these data make visible is not only the fragility of the individual but the pathology of the age. The achievement society's tools—smartphones, feeds, analytics, self-tracking—are extensions of its ideology. They accelerate visibility until interior life collapses into performance metrics. The transparent subject mistakes exposure for existence, stimulation for vitality. When those systems pause, the emptiness that floods in is not merely personal; it is civilizational withdrawal. The detox experiments are rehearsals for what humanity must eventually confront: a collective need to rediscover slowness before the nervous system of the species burns out, which is what Han focuses on in his book "*The Burnout Society.*"

The Coming Burnout: A Forecast of the Transparent Future

The above studies of disconnection offer more than anecdote; they are early seismographs of a tremor that has only begun. If the present trajectory of acceleration continues—if every interval of

quiet is filled, every moment of opacity illuminated—then what we see in digital-detox experiments today will become the permanent climate of tomorrow. The mind itself will have no winter, no night, only the sterile daylight of perpetual activity.

In *The Burnout Society*, Byung-Chul Han described this condition as the mutation of power from repression to compulsion.[43|44] No one forces us to be visible; we volunteer for the privilege. We whisper "yes" to every demand for attention until our own attention becomes the commodity we can no longer afford. The consequence is not a single catastrophe but a slow erosion, statistical and physiological. The numbers now arriving from psychology and medicine read like weather data from a planet whose temperature has already begun to rise.

By mid-century, if current rates hold, the average human attention span will have halved again. What once lasted minutes will shrink to seconds. Focus will become a luxury product, taught in retreats and sold by subscription. The capacity for deep thought—the cognitive equivalent of an old-growth forest—will recede under the clear-cutting of constant notification.[45] The mind will adapt by fragmenting; it will survive, but in smaller pieces.

Anxiety and depression, already the leading causes of disability worldwide, will become endemic. The World Health Organization's curves are as steep as any climate graph: rising three to four percent every decade.[46] By 2050 nearly half of humanity will meet diagnostic thresholds for mood or anxiety disorders. The body will register what the psyche cannot articulate: cortisol levels high, sleep shallow, immune systems confused. Each new device promising connection will tighten the loop of isolation.[47] Comfort will increase; peace will not.

The social atmosphere will thin as empathy continues its measurable decline. The statistics are stark: university samples show a forty-percent drop in empathic capacity since the year 2000.[48] By 2100, if nothing interrupts the trend, we may inhabit a civilization that feels almost nothing together. Compassion will survive as a brand identity, distributed through campaigns rather

than conversation. People will display care in the same way they display fitness—visibly, efficiently, algorithmically. The inner gesture of concern, slow and inconvenient, will seem obsolete.

Cultural time will flatten. Stories will shorten until only fragments remain, optimized for attention spans calibrated to the refresh rate. Reading comprehension will follow, as already seen in education data: a steady decline in the ability to sustain narrative sequence.[49] Without narrative, moral reasoning erodes, for ethics lives in duration—in the capacity to imagine consequences unfolding. The transparent subject, trapped in perpetual immediacy, will lose that imagination. The future will not be feared or hoped for; it will simply arrive, one update at a time.

Economically, the cost of exhaustion will equal that of pollution: a global loss approaching ten percent of GDP by 2050, fifteen percent by the end of the century. The new "externality" will be human attention—used, depleted, discarded. Companies will spend billions to repair the damage their platforms cause, just as industries now fund the cleanup of their own emissions.[50] And as with the climate, the damage will be uneven: wealth will buy seclusion, while poverty will mean permanent exposure.

Physically, the species will still thrive in numbers, but the texture of life will thin. The heart will beat faster; the breath will shorten. The nervous system, never off duty, will interpret existence as a continuous low-level emergency. The physiological metrics of stress—blood pressure, cortisol, inflammation—will be the new weather of the body.[51] What we once called serenity will appear as an archaic mood, like nostalgia for a climate that no longer exists.

The moral of these numbers is not doom but physics: systems cannot accelerate forever. Just as ecosystems collapse when diversity vanishes, consciousness collapses when duration disappears. The Buddha's analysis of dukkha—the suffering that arises from clinging—was not metaphysical but thermodynamic. To grasp is to generate heat. The *achievement society*, in grasping endlessly at itself, is heating the psychic atmosphere to fever. Han's

diagnosis is the thermometer; the detox data are the daily readings.[52]

If nothing changes, by the next century the transparent world will have achieved its ideal state: perfect exposure, perfect connection, perfect emptiness. Every surface will respond; every silence will be filled; every self will be optimized. But beneath that radiant order will lie the same fate as any overheated planet—exhaustion, desertification, the extinction of shade. The species will not perish; it will simply become too bright to see itself.

The warning is empirical, not prophetic. The statistics trace a curve as predictable as carbon levels: rising anxiety, falling empathy, shrinking attention, eroding meaning. We already know the first two stages of the curve—discomfort and boredom. The only question is whether we will permit the third—clarity—to emerge before relapse becomes permanent. The climate of the mind is changing. The numbers are the weather reports. The Dhamma, if we can still hear it, is the science of equilibrium—the invitation to cool the fires of becoming before the atmosphere of consciousness burns away.

From the Buddha's perspective, these findings are not surprising. They confirm that the mind's suffering arises not from the world's chaos but from the attempt to control it. The participants' first panic is *taṇhā*—craving—reacting to absence; their later calm is *nirodha*—the cessation that follows when craving tires. The Dhamma interprets the data differently: not as pathology corrected, but as insight uncovered. The boredom, the fear, the fleeting peace—each is a stage in seeing dependent origination in the flesh.[53] Stimulation conditions restlessness; restlessness conditions fatigue; fatigue conditions the longing for relief. When any link is seen clearly, the chain weakens.

What the statistics more than hint at, the Buddha made explicit: the only sustainable detox is understanding. Without wisdom, silence becomes merely a pause between noises; with wisdom, it becomes a doorway. The empirical record of modern detox programs thus performs a strange service—it translates Han's

critique and the Buddha's insight into the language of data. It shows, with measurable precision, that the acceleration of the *achievement society* is not just cultural rhetoric. It is happening inside bodies, inside brains, inside breath. And when that acceleration slows, even briefly, the same pattern repeats: disturbance, emptiness, then the first fragile taste of freedom.

The Buddha's teaching offers the only kind of transparency that heals: inner transparency, the lucidity that sees through craving rather than displaying it. This is not the transparency of exposure but of penetration—the light that shines through rather than on. It does not flatten the world but reveals its depth by removing delusion. To practice the Dhamma is to exchange the glare of surveillance for the radiance of understanding.

In the end, chaos returns as companion, not adversary. It is the breathing space of existence, the ever-changing pattern that keeps consciousness alive. To banish it was to banish life. When the practitioner finally sees this, the *achievement society's* slogans—"Yes, I can; yes, I must"—lose their hypnotic power. What replaces them is quieter and infinitely more daring: "Yes, it changes; yes, I see."

The modern world may continue its pursuit of seamless clarity, but beneath that perfection the ancient rhythm persists—the pulse of chaos, the hum of becoming. The task of the Dhamma, and of this book, is not to silence that hum but to hear it rightly, and understand it clearly. For only in understanding it does one realize that stillness is not the absence of motion but its deepest harmony.

Chapter 6 - The Disappearance of Rituals

> *"Rituals transform being-in-the-world into dwelling-in-the-world."*
>
> — Byung-Chul Han[1]

We used to greet the morning as if it were a guest. We had a ritual for waking up and greeting the day. The cup of tea, the moment of freshness, the ritual of the coffee-making, the shared silence before work—these were not chores but small ceremonies that gave form to the day. In the measured rhythm of repetition, awareness found a home. Sayadaw U Tejaniya would say that mindfulness is not built through novelty but through seeing again what is already here.[2] To repeat an action with presence is to see its depth. Without such ritual forms, the mind drifts toward distraction; it loses the texture of its own life.

Erich Fromm once warned that when modern man abandons ritual, he does not become free—he becomes anxious.[3] The ritual once told him how to meet others, how to belong, how to orient himself in time. Without it, he must invent meaning anew each morning, alone. He works and speaks without symbols, communicates without ceremony, and mistakes the absence of ritual form for freedom. Yet the life devoid of ritual form soon collapses into loneliness, because the self, untethered from shared gestures, cannot confirm its place among others.

Byung-Chul Han observes that this loss of ritual form defines the digital age.[4] We have exchanged repetition for updates, ceremony for spontaneity, communion for display. The old greetings—the handshake, the handwritten letter, the personal phone call, the community festival—carried the weight of continuity. The new ones, flickering on screens, vanish as soon as they appear. Ritual was a vessel of time; it held the flow of life so meaning could settle. Now time has become a smooth surface, endlessly refreshed but never deepened.

In this culture of immediacy, every moment demands to be seen, and nothing endures long enough to be remembered. The sacred has not been destroyed; it has been dispersed—diluted into millions

of gestures of self-expression that no longer bind us to one another. The mind, deprived of rhythm, moves like a restless cursor, always ready for the next thing but never quite touching what is here.[5]

Han's lament, Fromm's warning, and Tejaniya's instruction converge in a single recognition: without ritual, we no longer live with the world but merely in it.[6] From this situation the statement "I don't like people," is born. Ritual once transformed existence into participation. Its disappearance marks not progress but amnesia—a forgetting of how to inhabit our own moments fully. Avoidance of ritual is not freedom. Avoidance of ritual increases the distance between and separates people.

The *no-society*—that world of restraint, patience, and external authority—had its defects, but it was rich in form. It was a world paced by rituals that shaped how one moved through the hours and the years.[7] A handshake was not merely contact; it was a ceremony of recognition. Sunday visits to relatives, handwritten notes, and fixed meal hours were quiet affirmations that human connection required tending. The smallest customs stitched life into a shared fabric. Even the word "should"—so often heard as repression—carried within it an echo of rhythm: there is a time, a place, a way to act.

These rituals gave the *no-society* an unspoken resilience. They offered each person a way to locate themselves within a web of continuity. When life became difficult—and it often did—there was already a script to lean on: kneel, pray, write a letter, attend the gathering, bake some bread, set the table, bow your head. The act itself carried meaning even when meaning felt remote. Repetition provided shelter; to do what had been done before was to remember that one was not alone in doing it.

The *achievement society* inherited the world but not its rhythm.[8] In casting off the "no," it also discarded the form that made "yes" bearable. It kept the freedom but lost the ceremony that once gave freedom shape. The handshake becomes a text message, the letter an emoji, the family visit a post. Each substitution accelerates communication but erodes communion. What once required time

and presence now occurs in fragments of attention, and those fragments cannot build continuity.

The Architecture of the Ordinary

When I was a child, my British grandmother attached a quiet solemnity to the simplest of acts. The correct placement of the dinnerware was not a matter of vanity; it was law. The fork to the left, the knife to the right, the napkin folded just so. At precisely four in the afternoon, she made tea with the patience of a watchmaker: water at the proper temperature, pot warmed first, milk poured after—not before. My Portuguese grandparents, by contrast, kept time through the rhythm of festivals. They worked very hard, saved like misers, and waited for the calendar's bright interruptions: the feast days, the parades, the slow tolling of bells that announced not merely a celebration but the renewal of belonging. None of them could have explained why these customs mattered so deeply. They simply did. Ritual, for them, was not belief—it was breath.

Rituals are older than language, older than reason.[9] Long before humans could explain the world, they repeated it. The repetition itself was a defense against chaos, an affirmation that life was not random but rhythmic. Every civilization, before it wrote philosophy, arranged its gestures into patterns: meals, greetings, songs, ceremonies. To place the cup in its proper spot or to sit in your chair, next to the lamp to read, to wind the clock before bed, turning on the porch light, just in case a visitor might call, was to carve out a space where time could rest. The mind, anchored in these familiar ritual forms, could exhale.

My grandmother's table was a miniature cosmos. The arrangement of silver and porcelain was not trivial but metaphysical—it was the human longing for order expressed in teaspoons. In that small domestic liturgy, chaos ended at the edge of the cloth. The act of making tea each day at the same hour was

an unwritten confirmation of an ordered life: the world still turns, and I still belong to its turning – all is well.

The Portuguese festivals spoke the same language on a grander scale. They were the choreography of continuity. The entire village became a body that remembered itself—through processions, through song, through shared labor transformed into joy. These were not mere entertainments; they were rehearsals of coherence. They told the people that time had seasons, that death was followed by harvest, that the world, though precarious, kept its promises if one kept the rhythm and – all was well – even if it wasn't.

Byung-Chul Han calls this transformation of existence into dwelling—the movement from merely being in the world to living within it.[10] Erich Fromm would have said such rituals nourish the need for rootedness, the psychological anchor that keeps freedom from dissolving into anxiety.[11] And Sayadaw U Tejaniya, speaking from the interior vantage of mindfulness, would call it the awareness that arises from repetition: each gesture, done again and again, not as habit but as presence, deepens rather than dulls.[12]

When such rituals vanish, the world loses its grammar. The self is left to improvise meaning moment by moment, like a sentence without syntax. The *achievement society*, in shedding the old repetitions, has traded rhythm for acceleration. It mistakes stillness for stagnation, pattern for oppression. Yet in doing so, it dismantles the invisible architecture that once made ordinary life bearable, even beautiful.

The older "no" generations could not explain why ritual mattered because explanation belongs to an age that has already forgotten. To ask why is to stand outside the act. They didn't analyze their rituals—they inhabited them. Meaning was not something they sought; it was something they performed. The gesture itself was the answer. To set the table properly, to pour the tea with care, to gather for the feast—these were ways of saying, without words, that life is uncertain but form is merciful. That the universe, for a moment, can be held steady in the placement of a cup.

We can now cast our gaze onto a modern-day example of the importance of ritual. The television series, "*All Creatures Great and Small*,"—whether the original 1978 version or its modern revival—casts a spell that seems, at first, nostalgic.[13] It presents a world that moves at the pace of hoofbeats and kitchen kettles, where people knock before entering, take off their hats indoors, and thank one another for the smallest kindness. Beneath the bucolic charm, however, lies something profound: the persistence of ritual as a mode of being.

James Herriot, the main character, and his world, represents the quintessential *no-society*. Every gesture is bounded by form—moral, social, and temporal. The farmer's handshake seals a promise. Sunday dinner gathers the household into its weekly liturgy. The day begins with the ritual of boots and kettle; it ends with the ritual of gratitude for work done. Hierarchies are clear but humanized: respect for elders, deference to tradition, courtesy in disagreement. The show's rhythm—its long pauses, its silences between words—is itself a kind of homage to the pause we spoke of earlier, the unhurried generosity of attention.

Why does this world continue to captivate audiences from the *achievement society*, a world supposedly addicted to speed, irony, and novelty? The answer lies in deprivation. The viewers sense, even if unconsciously, that this older world contains something they have lost: coherence. In Herriot's Yorkshire, meaning isn't manufactured; it's enacted through ritual—tea shared after bad news, the repetition of work that tends both animals and relationships, the collective respect for the weather, the soil, and time itself. Every episode is a small hymn to the rhythm of ritual.

The *achievement society*, by contrast, has replaced rhythm with immediacy. It measures value by visibility and efficiency, not by continuity. To the modern viewer raised in that environment, Herriot's world can appear unbearably slow—or achingly peaceful, depending on how one's nervous system has been trained.

Many younger viewers interpret such slowness as sentimentality, because they lack the experiential vocabulary to read it or understand it. The series' rituals—the handshake, the meal, the shared grief over a lost calf—are not narrative decoration; they are the story itself. But to an achievement-conditioned eye, they register as quaint gestures lacking "action" – lacking substance – lacking anything important or necessary.

So, the apparent *disinterest* of the achievement generation is, more accurately, incomprehension. It is not that they disdain these rituals; it is that they have never been fluent in the language those rituals speak. They can decode content but not ceremony. They feel the calm but cannot trace its source. It's like listening to a piece of music in a forgotten scale: beautiful, but strangely foreign.

This is why *All Creatures Great and Small* continues to draw viewers even in the era of streaming hyper-stimulation. Beneath its gentleness is a deep psychological hunger: the longing for ritual time. Watching it, one remembers what it feels like to inhabit a world that doesn't demand constant self-display, where conversation carries weight and silence carries meaning. The show functions almost like a televised memory of the "no-society's" grace—a reminder that to be limited by form is not oppression but dwelling.

In that light, the *achievement society's* restless search for "authentic content" is an unconscious search for what it has forgotten how to name: the beauty of repetition, the safety of ritual, the quiet dignity of knowing one's place in the pattern of things. *All Creatures Great and Small* gives them, for an hour, the illusion of returning home to a house they never knew they missed – the concept that "there's no place like home."

Ritual, even in its simplest expressions, once reconciled the individual to the flow of life. It reminded people that they were part of something cyclical and enduring—a family, a town, a season, a cosmos. The *achievement society*, in its obsession with self-definition and visibility, replaced cycles with linear progress, meaning with metrics and optics. In doing so, it severed the

umbilical cord connecting the self to the communal pulse of existence.

The paradox is that the *no-society*, for all its restraint, contained more genuine affirmation. To obey a rhythm was to belong to it. To repeat a gesture was to share in a memory older than oneself – to share in history - the ancient. Those who lived within that cadence may have felt constrained, but they also knew where they stood in the unfolding of days. The disappearance of ritual leaves modern people free in theory, but unmoored in practice—adrift in smooth time, always beginning, never returning.

In the *no-society*, language was a kind of social architecture—carefully built and quietly inhabited. Conversations were slow rituals of exchange, designed not to win or display but to dwell within together. Words were measured not out of inhibition but out of regard. One spoke, then paused—not merely to breathe or think, but to offer space. The pause was a gift, a moment in which one's attention was ceremoniously handed to the other. It was an invisible bow.

In that silence, respect took tangible form. The speaker's pause said: I have finished my thought; now I turn toward yours. It was the verbal equivalent of placing an offering before another person, a small gesture of mutual dignity. Such pauses were woven into conversation like rests in music—moments where nothing was said but everything was heard. They allowed for reflection, for the shaping of thought before reply, for the subtle awareness that conversation was not a contest of ideas but a shared rhythm of minds.

In this way, dialogue itself was ritual. It enacted the principle that understanding arises not from speed or cleverness, but from attention. To converse was to honor the presence of another consciousness—to grant it time, patience, and the courtesy of silence. This etiquette of speech formed the moral texture of the *no-society*. It taught that to listen was not passive but participatory, that to pause was to keep company with meaning.

By contrast, the *achievement society* has forgotten this etiquette of time. Its speech patterns accelerate like its production cycles—rapid, overlapping, impatient. The pause has vanished, replaced by interruption or the scrolling reflex. In losing the ritual of the pause, conversation lost its courtesy, and with it, its soul.

The *achievement society*, by contrast, speaks incessantly but rarely converses. Speech has become instrumental: a means to self-promotion, to networking, to demonstrating opinion rather than seeking understanding. What masquerades as dialogue is often alternating monologue. The purpose is not communion but confirmation.[14]

When people no longer live inside shared rituals, they lose the symbolic grammar that makes deep conversation possible. Ritual teaches patience, listening, and empathy. A ritual meal, for instance, requires that everyone wait, serve, and partake together—a choreography of mutual recognition. A ritual greeting acknowledges the other's presence before asserting one's own. Remove these foundations, and conversation devolves into the exchange of data points.

Byung-Chul Han would call this the "communication of transparency": everything is exposed, but nothing is revealed.[15] The achievement subject speaks about the measurable and the visible—work, consumption, entertainment—because those are the only currencies that still hold value in a society of visibility. Topics like gratitude, beauty, mortality, or the nature of existence require inwardness; they demand stillness and vulnerability. But inwardness is the very condition the *achievement society* represses. Reflection is inefficiency; silence is loss of productivity.

The result is a civilization fluent in language but illiterate in dialogue. People know how to talk, but not why. They speak to maintain the performance of connection, not to experience connection itself. They are surrounded by words yet untouched by meaning.[16]

Erich Fromm anticipated this decades ago: modern people, he wrote, are terrified of genuine contact because it threatens their fragile autonomy.[17] The achievement subject inherits this fear in

amplified form; to listen deeply risks dissolving the carefully constructed self. It's safer to talk about shows, devices, and productivity goals—these require no exposure of the heart.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya would diagnose this as the absence of *sati*—the mindful presence that listens before reacting, that senses the tone beneath the words.[18] When the mind is conditioned to leap from task to task, it cannot dwell long enough to hear. Real conversation, like meditation, is an act of stillness. It requires that we stop performing and simply meet what is there.[19]

So yes—the *achievement society* has produced people who cannot talk in the old sense, not because they are unintelligent, but because the conditions for real conversation have eroded. They have mastered expression but lost communion. The disappearance of ritual silenced not their tongues, but their ability to listen—to others, to silence, and to themselves.[20]

The deeper tragedy is that without conversation, the human community becomes unreflective. We stop asking questions that lead to meaning and instead trade sentences that keep us busy. When the capacity for dialogue dies, culture itself begins to thin, like air at high altitude—breathable, but barely.[21]

Chapter 7 - The Disappearance of the Other

> "*When the self demands to see all things, and all things become self, the mind loses the power to behold anything. What cannot be hidden cannot be loved.*"
>
> — Dipobhāsadhamma

In *The Burnout Society*, Han sketches the new human condition: no longer the obedient subject of external command but the self-driven achiever of internal compulsion.[1] The slogans of modern life— "Yes I can," "Be your best self," "Stay positive"—mask a subtle tyranny. Where the disciplinary society once demanded obedience, the *achievement society* demands self-optimization. The whip has been internalized. The modern subject exploits itself in the name of freedom and collapses under the weight of its own performance. Fatigue, depression, and anxiety replace repression as the defining moods of the age. The self has become both master and slave, and the burnout that results is not physical exhaustion but existential depletion: a nervous system consumed by its own striving.

Han's, *The Agony of Eros,* begins where *The Burnout Society* leaves off. Having charted the mechanics of self-exploitation, Han turns to its emotional aftermath—the disappearance of Eros, the vanishing of the Other.[2] In a world obsessed with visibility, transparency, and self-exposure, the mysterious and the unknowable have become intolerable. Eros, for Han, is not mere sexuality but the movement toward what lies beyond oneself, the longing for *alterity*. To love, to think, to create—all depend on the existence of an Other that resists complete assimilation. Yet the achievement subject, addicted to self-presentation, can no longer bear this resistance. Every encounter is flattened into a reflection of the self. The Other becomes a mirror, and the mirror grows opaque with sameness.

Han's use of the word *alterity*: The word originates from the Latin alter, meaning other. It literally means otherness. But in philosophical usage, especially in the lineage that Han draws from — Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Buber, and phenomenology more broadly — alterity does not simply mean "difference" or "someone else." It points to that which cannot be reduced to the self's

categories: whatever resists assimilation into our own perspective, control, or definition.[3][4][5]

When Han says that Eros is the longing for *alterity*, he means that genuine desire — whether erotic, artistic, or intellectual — is a movement beyond the boundaries of the self. It is not craving for possession, which collapses the "Other" into something we can own or consume, but yearning for encounter with what transcends us.

Alterity is the presence of what remains opaque even in intimacy — the irreducible reality of another being, another consciousness, another mystery. In the erotic sense, it's the lover as truly other: someone whose inner world we can approach but never fully comprehend. In the artistic sense, it's the muse, the silence before creation, the world's strangeness that the artist listens to rather than masters. This disappearance of otherness turns the erotic into the pornographic. Pornography, for Han, *is the annihilation of distance; everything is exposed, nothing withheld*.[6] Likewise, the digital spectacle of social media renders existence itself pornographic: the compulsive display of what was once private, sacred, or ineffable.[7] In that total visibility, desire dies. When nothing is hidden, nothing can be sought. Thus, the agony of Eros is the agony of a world that has made mystery obsolete and passion a commodity.

The link between these two works—Burnout and Agony—is not merely thematic but structural. Burnout analyzes how the subject consumes itself; Agony reveals how, in consuming itself, it destroys the possibility of relation. The logic of self-optimization annihilates the space of encounter. Without the negative—the unknown, the forbidden, the painful—life collapses into sterile affirmation. The self becomes an echo chamber. Han calls this the triumph of positivity; it is, in truth, the death of depth.

Here *Neuronal Dukkha* enters as the third term of the equation, bridging Han's European phenomenology with the Buddha's psychological diagnosis. The "burnout subject" is a modern variation of the being tormented by dukkha—the unsatisfactory, dissatisfaction of the unstable nature of conditioned existence. In

the Buddha's teaching, suffering arises from *taṇhā* (craving) and *upādāna* (clinging): the relentless grasping at experience in order to construct and defend a self – an identity. Han's "achievement subject" is simply the contemporary expression of this same clinging, mechanized through technology and intensified by capitalist psychology. The self seeks completion through performance, as if accumulating enough validation could silence the inner sense of lack – the emotional void. Yet every success deepens the hunger; every like, every metric of approval, strengthens the craving for more.[8|9|10]

In Han's terms, the subject is consumed by sameness. In terms of the Buddha's philosophy, it is consumed by *avijjā*—ignorance of the true nature of experience. The result is what I have named *neuronal dukkha*: the biological inscription of this psychic disequilibrium. The brain's reward circuits, wired for novelty and affirmation, become loops of self-inflicted suffering. The pursuit of dopamine becomes the modern form of *taṇhā*; the exhaustion that follows is the physiological echo of *dukkha* (dissatisfaction). The neural system mirrors the psychological: feedback without insight, activity without awareness.

Han's lament for the disappearance of the "Other" parallels the Buddha's diagnosis of delusion (*moha*). When perception is governed by craving, we do not encounter the world as it is but only as it serves our desire. The Other is not seen; it is consumed. True Eros—*the capacity to be touched by something beyond the self*—requires precisely what the Buddha called *nibbidā*: the disenchantment that arises when one finally sees through the futility of clinging.[11] Han experiences the loss of transcendence as tragedy; the Buddha turned that same realization into the beginning of freedom from dissatisfaction and suffering. Both recognize that meaning is born from distance, that the world loses texture when the self devours it.

If *The Burnout Society* is the pathology of over-achievement and *The Agony of Eros* is the pathology of relational collapse, then *Neuronal Dukkha* becomes the integrated diagnosis of both: the inner mechanics by which craving, amplified by technology and

neuro-economy, corrodes the human capacity for stillness, empathy, and wisdom. Han mourns the loss of the negative; the Buddha invites us to see the negative—suffering and dissatisfaction itself—as the teacher. Where Han ends in elegy, *Neuronal Dukkha* continues toward remedy.

To restore Eros, Han suggests, we must recover the "Other"—the mystery that resists possession. The Buddha would phrase it differently: liberation arises when the illusion of "I" and "mine" dissolves and awareness no longer clings. In both, freedom and understanding lies in re-encountering reality unfiltered by the self. Han's longing for transcendence and the Buddha's path of non-clinging are two sides of the same gesture: a turning away from narcissistic consumption toward direct presence.

Neuronal Dukkha is designed as a bridge—linking Han's Western philosophy of fatigue and absence with the Buddha's psychology of freedom and liberation. It reveals that the burnout of the nervous system and the agony of Eros are not two separate crises but one continuous process: the self collapsing under the weight of its own becoming. To understand that process is already to loosen its grip. The cure lies not in further optimization, but in the gentle undoing of the compulsion to be someone at all. In that undoing, the "Other" reappears—not as object of desire, but as the world itself, luminous and unhidden.

Identification of the Other

In *The Agony of Eros*, Byung-Chul Han treats "the Other" as the measure of our capacity for transcendence – transcendence from the clinging to a vision of a "self" identity. The "Other" is whatever resists assimilation—whatever cannot be reduced to the mirror of the self. It may be another person, a work of art, a mystery, or even death itself. To encounter the "Other" is to be wounded by what we cannot control or fully know. This wound is not pathology; it is the opening through which love, imagination, and knowledge enter the world.[12]

Han draws here from a long lineage of Western thought. In Emmanuel Levinas, the "Other" is the ethical absolute—the face that interrupts our narcissism and demands responsibility. For Martin Buber, the "Other" is the "Thou" that transforms existence from objectified experience into relationship. For Jacques Lacan, the "Other" is the symbolic order—the vast network of language and desire into which the self is born and by which it is shaped. In each of these, the "Other" names the space where the self meets what exceeds it.[13]

But Han's diagnosis is that this space has collapsed. The modern person, obsessed with transparency, positivity, and efficiency, no longer tolerates opacity or delay, shutting out the "Other," because the "Other" is perceived as an obstacle to optimization. Every difference must be neutralized, every mystery explained. The result is a world of sameness: communication without communion, visibility without intimacy. Han calls this the inferno of the same. The erotic, the poetic, and the sacred—all require distance, uncertainty, and the willingness to be undone. When these vanish, the world becomes a hall of mirrors.

In the Buddha's philosophy, we find a remarkably similar drama, though framed in psychological rather than metaphysical terms. The Buddha did not speak of "the Other" in the language of Western phenomenology, yet his analysis of perception reveals an equally profound insight: we do not truly see others because we do not truly see ourselves. What we call "self" (*atta*) is itself a fabrication—a compound of body, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness, stitched together by craving and delusion. When the mind mistakes this bundle for a fixed identity, it perceives everything else through the same distortion: as either "mine," "for me," or "against me." Thus, the world of "others" is born not from reality but from the conceit of selfhood.

The Buddha described this as *maññanā*—the conceiving tendency that divides experience into self and other, subject and object. To the awakened mind, the world is not populated by "others," but by interdependent processes. The boundary between

self and other is seen as conventional, not ultimate. Where Han sees the disappearance of the "Other" as tragedy, the Buddha might see it as illusion to begin with—an illusion that, once penetrated, frees one from both narcissism and alienation.

Still, the two thinkers meet on common ground. For both, the modern human being has lost the capacity to meet reality as it is. Han's "Other" is engulfed by sameness; the Buddha's world of experience is swallowed by craving, owning, desiring; what Fromm identifies as the having or being mode. Both diagnoses point to a form of blindness: the refusal to let what is not-self reveal itself on its own terms. Han's language of "transparency" and "exposure" mirrors the Buddha's *avijjā*—ignorance that blinds insight by overlaying the world with projection. The Buddha called the corrective, *yoniso manasikāra* — "wise attention," the turning of the mind toward things as they truly are, free from craving or aversion.

Psychology offers its own variations on this theme. Sigmund Freud described narcissism as the inability to recognize the autonomy of the other; everything becomes an extension of the ego. Carl Jung, in contrast, viewed encounter with the "Other"—often projected as shadow or anima—as essential for individuation, the process of becoming whole. Martin Heidegger spoke of the "worlding" of the world—the fact that Being itself is revealed only through our openness to what stands beyond our grasp. Even contemporary neuroscience echoes this: the brain's default mode network, the circuitry that sustains our sense of self, quiets during states of awe, love, or deep attention—moments when the "Other" breaks through the enclosure of self-referential thought.

In *Neuronal Dukkha*, the "Other" can thus be understood in two converging senses. In Han's sense, it is what modern consciousness has annihilated: alterity, mystery, the unassimilable. In the Buddha's sense, it is what ignorance fabricates as distinct when, in truth, no boundary exists. One view mourns the loss of difference; the other exposes the illusion of division. Yet they are not opposed. Both speak to a fundamental human failure to relate properly—to either the world, others, or oneself.

From the standpoint of the Buddha's philosophy, the path forward is not to reconstitute the "Other" but to dissolve the ignorance that makes "self" and "other" appear separate in the first place. Compassion (*karuṇā*) arises naturally when this separation collapses—not as a moral duty but as a spontaneous recognition that the suffering of another is not different in kind from one's own. In Han's vocabulary, this would be the restoration of true Eros—the reawakening of the capacity to be touched by what is not us.

Seen this way, *Neuronal Dukkha* becomes the bridge between Han's nostalgia for the "Other" and the Buddha's insight into its emptiness. It reframes the crisis of modern subjectivity not as the disappearance of something external, but as the malfunction of perception itself. The modern mind, overstimulated and self-referential, has lost the neurological and psychological quiet in which otherness can appear. Han calls this "the agony of Eros"; the Buddha calls it dukkha. Both are names for the same wound—the suffering born when the mind cannot rest in what is, because it cannot stop constructing what it imagines itself to be.

Reclamation of the Other

Han's "*inferno of the same*" is not merely a critique of conformity; it is an ontological diagnosis.[14] It names a world where all difference has been absorbed into the logic of the self. In the *achievement society*, everything becomes a mirror of productivity and performance. The "Other" is no longer met but managed; no longer beheld but optimized. The language of efficiency replaces that of mystery. Communication, once a bridge between two interior worlds, now collapses into exchange—fast, transparent, and hollow. In such a climate, nothing interrupts the self's monologue. Everything becomes data, feedback, affirmation. The world glows with sameness, and that glow blinds.

Han calls this an inferno because it is radiant and cold at once. The self burns in its own light.[15] When every experience is reduced to what can be shared, measured, or displayed, nothing remains that can transform us. The erotic, the sacred, and the

contemplative—each requires that something remain hidden, unknown, resistant. The inferno of the same is therefore not a place of punishment but of impoverishment: the loss of the very tension through which meaning and beauty arise.

From the Buddha's standpoint, this loss is not new. It is the ancient blindness of *avijjā*—ignorance of things as they are.[16] The modern human being has not simply lost the "Other;" it has lost the ability to perceive anything that is not filtered through *atta*, the conceit of self. The inferno of sameness is thus a technological amplification of a primordial delusion. What Han sees as social pathology, the Buddha identified as the root of all suffering: the mind's tendency to grasp, to define, to make the fluid world solid so that the fiction of "I" can stand and be identified.

The Buddha described perception as conditioned by craving. What we see is shaped by what we want, and what we want is shaped by who we think we are. People of the modern *achievement society* have perfected this cycle. Everything becomes an extension of identity: work, relationship, even leisure. To rest is to risk invisibility. To pause is to feel the emptiness that the inferno conceals. Thus, the modern person keeps busy not to achieve but to avoid—the avoidance of the silence in which the illusion of self might begin to crack – the aversion that cannot be named but is felt.

Han's Eros, properly understood, is the movement that could pierce this circle. Eros is the desire that reaches beyond the self, that seeks the "Other" not to consume but to encounter. It is the yearning that acknowledges lack, that accepts vulnerability as the price of transcendence. Yet in the *achievement society*, even Eros has been domesticated. Desire is managed, curated, displayed. The raw encounter with otherness—what the Greeks would have called eros as divine madness—is replaced by controlled stimulation.[17|18] Nothing shocks, nothing humbles. The result is not pleasure but weariness: the exhaustion of a self that can no longer be surprised.

The Buddha's insight into *anattā* (non-self) offers the counterpoint. Where Han sees transcendence as the recovery of the "Other," the Buddha sees liberation as the dissolution of the boundary that makes "self" and "other" seem opposed.[19|20]

Awareness (*sati*) does not consume the world, as craving does, nor deny it, as asceticism might. It simply knows. In this knowing—clear, direct, unfiltered—the world appears in its suchness (*tathatā*). There is neither sameness nor otherness, neither subject nor object, but interdependence: phenomena arising and ceasing in mutual condition. To see thus is to be free from the inferno of the same, not by fleeing difference, but by understanding that sameness and difference are both constructions of the clinging mind.

When Han speaks of the disappearance of the "Other," he is, from a perspective of the Buddha, describing a civilization in which the mind's delusion has become collective. The *achievement society* externalizes *upādāna*—the grasping that turns perception into possession. What we call "the digital self" or "the brand" is merely craving codified, made visible. In such a world, the restoration of the "Other" is not a return to duality but a return to awareness—the rediscovery of what the Buddha called *yoniso manasikāra*, wise attention. This attention does not fixate on difference or sameness; it listens. It allows the world to disclose itself.

The key, then, is understanding that "the Other" is not something to be regained but something to be rightly seen – allowed to gestate – invited without boundary. When the self ceases its restless consumption, otherness appears again—not as object, but as presence. It is what the Buddha called *nibbāna* in the midst of the world: the cooling of the fire of appropriation – a blowing out of the fuel that keeps the fires of suffering and dissatisfaction burning. To encounter another person, another creature, or even a thought without the reflex of grasping is already to dwell outside the inferno.

In this light, Han's Eros of transcendence and the Buddha's wisdom of non-clinging converge in a single act of awareness: the turning of consciousness away from the compulsive need to make the world "mine," toward the quiet wonder of letting the world be.

Eros transforms from the agony of absence into the serenity of insight. The "Other" is no longer what stands against the self, but what reveals that there was never a separate self to begin with.

Such awareness does not extinguish difference; it restores it to its rightful scale. The bird, the river, the stranger, the lover—all remain distinct, but no longer alien. The sameness that Han calls infernal, dissolves, not through rebellion, but through understanding. When the illusion of separation ends, the world reappears in its infinite variety. What was once the agony of Eros, becomes the joy of seeing clearly.

Thus, the path out of the inferno is not resistance but realization. To meet reality as it is, the modern human being must relearn how to be wounded by what is real—to feel the trembling edge where the self meets what it cannot control. The Buddha called this dukkha; Han calls it agony; both are gateways to awakening. And in that awakening, the Other is no longer lost—it is everywhere.

Eros, Pornography and Consciousness

In common speech, the word eros has been narrowed to mean romantic or sexual desire. It is a synonym for passion, often confused with lust. Yet for centuries before it was reduced to the language of marketing and therapy, Eros was the name for a cosmic principle. To the Greeks, Eros was not only a god of love but the binding force that pulled chaos into order—the attraction by which life arises and holds together. [21] Plato, in the Symposium, described Eros as a person's inner sense of longing for beauty and transcendence, a yearning that propels us toward the divine by way of the beloved. Eros, in this deeper sense, is the engine of relation—the force that draws what is separate into communion while still preserving the distance that makes communion possible.

Byung-Chul Han returns to this older sense of Eros. In *The Agony of Eros*, he does not speak of desire as mere appetite, but as the movement toward the Other. Eros is the courage to step beyond the self's enclosure – identity; to risk being changed by encounter. It is

the openness to alterity, to mystery, to what cannot be possessed. Eros, therefore, is not a symptom of lack but a recognition of it—the creative tension between self and Other that makes meaning possible.

To clarify Han's use of the word eros, I suggest that when he speaks of Eros, he's reaching back to the ancient Greek sense, not the modern one. For the Greeks, eros was the *life-force of connection*—the energy that draws beings toward one another and toward the beautiful. [22] Plato, in the *Symposium*, describes eros as the ladder by which the mind ascends from physical attraction to love of the good, the true, and the divine.[23] It is the passion that unites rather than consumes.

Han inherits this philosophical lineage. When he writes of the *Agony of Eros*, he means the withering of that connective force in a culture that turns everything into self-reference.[24] Eros, for him, is the power to be moved by the "Other," to be drawn out of oneself by beauty, vulnerability, or encounter. The pornographic culture, by contrast, flattens this movement into consumption. It replaces relationship with display.

Now, as to the linguistic question: what kind of usage is this? Well, it's not exactly a metaphor (which is a figurative substitution, saying one thing is another). Nor is it quite an analogy (a comparison showing similarity between two structures). Han's use, which I have adopted for *Neuronal Dukkha*, belongs to what scholars of language and philosophy call conceptual or philosophical usage—sometimes described as a semantic recovery or re-appropriation.

In this kind of usage, a thinker deliberately reclaims an older, broader sense of a word that has been narrowed or trivialized by modern language. Heidegger did this constantly with words like "Being" (Sein) or "aletheia" (truth as un-concealment). Han does it with Eros and ritual.[25] The purpose is not figurative ornament but conceptual repair—to restore the word's original scope so it can carry a philosophical insight that ordinary speech has lost.

So, you might describe Han's use of Eros as a philosophical revival or semantic restoration: he is returning the word to its original existential and relational depth. He's not using it as metaphor but as a reclaimed concept.

But, the modern world, Han argues, has forgotten this tension. In the *achievement society*, everything is drawn into the circle of the self—measured, displayed, optimized, consumed. There is no longer any distance between subject and object, no opacity in which longing might dwell. The self no longer reaches outward; it reflects itself endlessly by the manufacture of a branded identity. This is the agony of Eros: desire without transcendence, contact without encounter.

To express this condition, Han uses the language of pornography. In his usage, pornography is not confined to sexual explicitness; it is the paradigm of a culture that cannot bear the hidden – it wants everything to be transparent and exposed.[26] Pornography is the annihilation of distance—the exposure of everything to view, the demand that nothing remain unsaid or unseen. It is the fantasy of total transparency. Where Eros depends on veiling, suggestion, and delay, pornography insists on immediacy. Where Eros venerates the unknowable, pornography flattens it into image.

In that sense, pornography is not merely an industry; it is an ontology - what there is and what kinds of things count as real. It is the worldview of a civilization that has replaced mystery with data, intimacy with access, and contemplation with display. The pornographic mind wants everything visible, knowable, consumable—yet this very hunger destroys the conditions of genuine knowing. For knowledge, like love, requires difference. To understand something, one must first let it stand apart.

Eros, then, is the name for that space of apartness—the sacred interval between self and other where meaning germinates. In the absence of that interval, life becomes sterile. The pornographic saturation of modern culture does not signify too much desire but too little: the substitution of stimulation for wonder, visibility for

vision. Han's lament is that in showing everything, we have made nothing worth seeing; a condition that foments boredom.

From this perspective, the inferno of the same is not a moral failure but a metaphysical one. When everything is made the same, there can be no Eros, for there is nothing left to reach toward. The world without otherness is a world without movement, without the pulse of longing that makes consciousness expand. The modern person, surrounded by mirrors of the self, mistakes exposure for intimacy and information for truth. Yet beneath the glare of transparency, a quiet starvation persists—the hunger for what resists the grasp.

The Buddha would have understood this hunger well, though he would have described its mechanism differently. Where Han sees the collapse of Eros (passion) into sameness, the Buddha saw the collapse of perception into craving. Both describe the same imprisonment: a mind that cannot stop turning the world into a reflection of itself. The Buddha taught that liberation arises not from abolishing desire but from understanding its true nature—seeing that what we crave, when grasped, turns to ash because the grasp itself destroys the space in which joy could arise. In this sense, Eros and mindfulness (*sati*) share a secret kinship. Both depend on reverent distance, on the willingness to meet reality without consumption.

Thus, when Han speaks of the agony of Eros, he is describing more than an emotional malaise; he is diagnosing the metaphysical poverty of a civilization that no longer knows how to behold. Eros withers when the world becomes too visible, too familiar, too fast. The return of Eros—the reawakening of the "Other"—is not a matter of restoring romance but of restoring wonder. It requires the rediscovery of hiddenness, the rediscovery of that sacred space between seeing and knowing.

Pornography, in Han's expanded sense then, is the erasure of that space. It is the refusal of mystery, the reduction of all depth to surface. It is not erotic excess but erotic failure—the exhaustion of a world where everything is exposed and nothing is revealed. Eros,

by contrast, is revelation itself: the dawning recognition that the world's value lies precisely in what eludes us.

To speak of Eros, then, is to speak of the possibility of transcendence—not in the religious sense of ascending beyond the world, but in the human sense of touching what is more than ourselves. Eros is the antidote to the inferno of the same because it reopens the space of encounter. It restores the trembling distance between seer and seen, self and world, through which insight—true knowledge—flows. In that trembling, life regains its texture, and awareness its depth.

Seen this way, the agony of Eros is not final. It is the cry of a world that longs to be seen again—not exposed, not consumed, but seen. To answer that cry is to recover the capacity for wonder, which is also the capacity for wisdom. For only when the Other is allowed to remain Other, does the self begin to understand what it truly is not.

Canvass of the Other

To the true artist, the blank canvas is not a void to be filled but a presence to be met. It waits like an "Other"—silent, opaque, and full of potential. Its emptiness is not absence but invitation. Before the first mark is made, there is a moment of hesitation, even reverence: the awareness that something beyond the self is about to come into being, and that one must be humble enough to let it happen. This is Eros in its pure form—the movement of the self toward what transcends it.

In this state, the artist is not a producer but a listener. The relationship with the canvas is dialogical, not instrumental.[27] Each brushstroke is a question, and the painting itself replies in tones and forms. The artist feels drawn forward by what cannot yet be seen, guided by intuition rather than plan. To create is to court the unknown, to surrender the illusion of control. Here, Eros is not desire for possession but longing for revelation. It is the same

movement Han describes—the openness to alterity, the willingness to be changed by what one encounters.

The same Eros moves through the composer seated before blank staves of unwritten music. The page, like the canvas, is an expanse of silence. The first note is not invention but discovery—a key pressed in faith that something hidden will respond. In that gesture lies the erotic tension (passion) between knowing and not knowing, between structure and mystery. Claude Debussy once said that music is the space between the notes, and his own works—*Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, and *Claire d'Lune*—breathe that space.[28] In both of these pieces, the notes do not rush to reveal; they linger, listening to their own echo. Each phrase is a question extended into silence, as if the composer were tracing the contours of something just beyond the reach of sound – the "Other." This is Eros at work: the yearning of tone for tone, of one sound calling another into being. The composer is seduced not by certainty but by wonder—the sense that the next note, though born from his hand, comes from elsewhere. It is the same humility the painter feels before the blank canvas: the awareness that creation unfolds only when control gives way to listening.

When we look upon, listen to, or read something created by someone fully connected to the "Other," we experience a communion—not in the religious sense, but as a meeting that transcends separateness. It is as though the artist, by surrendering the need to control or impress, has cleared a space within the work for something greater than themselves to enter. What we encounter in that space is not the artist's personality, nor merely their skill, but a resonance of reality unfiltered by self. We are touched by what touched them, thus the experience, the connection, manifests in awe.

Such works—whether a painting, a poem, a melody, or a line of architecture—do not call attention to their maker; they draw attention *through* their maker. The artist becomes transparent to the mystery they engage. When the hand paints from silence, when the poet writes from stillness, when the composer listens before striking the first note, the resulting form carries within it a still

pulse of that silence. The viewer, listener, or reader feels it as presence, as if the work were alive with its own breath.

This is what it means for creation to arise in communion with the Other. The Other, here, is not a person or a god, but that dimension of reality that cannot be possessed—the mystery that looks back when we dare to look deeply. To be immersed in it is to relinquish mastery, to create not from craving but from listening. When such listening is complete, what appears is no longer self-expression but revelation. The artist has given shape to something that wanted to be seen, and the audience, in receiving it, participates in the same act of awakening.

Contrast this with the works of the *achievement society*, born from the exhaustion of self-reference. There, art no longer listens—it broadcasts. Music shouts, color overwhelms, language performs, and architecture forgets how to dwell. Buildings no longer shelter meaning; they advertise it. Glass and steel scream transparency but house no interior life. The home becomes a showroom, the city a brand. In the achievement society, architecture no longer shapes spaces for being—it manufactures surfaces for seeing. The walls themselves participate in the performance, gleaming with the same anxious polish as the faces that pass before them. These works may astonish but they do not commune; they dazzle the senses without engaging the deeper consciousness. Their energy is centripetal, drawing attention back to the self rather than out toward the unknown. We consume them, but they do not consume us.[29]

Communion, by contrast, is the meeting of two silences—the silence of the one who creates and the silence of the one who beholds. We cannot draw, paint, photograph, speak, write or sing awe. Between them passes not information, but transformation.[30] When we look upon, listen to, or read something born from the Other, we are reminded of our own depth—the part of us that still knows how to wait, how to wonder, how to listen. The work becomes a mirror, not of the self we present, but of the consciousness that precedes it.

This is why great art, great music, great literature and architecture never ages. It speaks from beyond the confines of time and identity, because it was not made to impress but to reveal. In its presence, we are returned to what the *achievement society* has forgotten: that beauty is not the decoration of the world but its disclosure. To experience communion through art is to feel, however briefly, that the boundary between self and world has dissolved—that seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard, are one and the same movement of awareness. Such is the power of the Other in creation: it makes the world visible again.

But in the *achievement society*, even music becomes pornographic.[31] Sound is engineered for consumption, for algorithmic satisfaction. The first note is no longer a question but a signal. The composer's silence is replaced by production schedules, the pregnant pause by the beat drop. Every mystery is resolved before it can mature. The listener, like the viewer, is denied participation because nothing is withheld.

The difference between the musical world of the *no-society* and that of the *achievement society* is the difference between contemplation and consumption. In the *no-society*, composers such as Claude Debussy, Beethoven, Maurice Ravel, Rachmaninoff, and Erik Satie created within the atmosphere of distance and restraint—the very conditions in which Eros could live. Their music does not seize the listener; it invites. *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* begins with a single flute line that hesitates between tonalities, neither declaring nor resolving. The orchestra enters as if answering a call that it barely understands. This is not music of mastery but of discovery: each phrase opens toward an unseen horizon. Rêverie breathes the same air of suspension—melodies that drift, never insist, never fully arrive. The listener becomes participant, leaning forward into the unknown, feeling the beauty of what is withheld.

This is Eros in sound—the encounter with otherness through veiling and suggestion. The music does not expose itself; it invites approach. Its strength lies in ambiguity, in what it leaves unsaid. It asks the listener to imagine what is not yet heard. The composer creates not to impress but to converse with mystery.

Modern music, by contrast, mirrors the transparent psyche of the *achievement society*. Its soundscape is pornographic in Han's sense: overexposed, predictable, and instantly gratifying. The dominant genres—mainstream pop, EDM, trap, hyperpop, even algorithmically curated "chill" playlists—are structured for visibility and reward. The rhythm drops on schedule; the chorus repeats with mechanical precision; compression eliminates silence so that every second delivers stimulation. Nothing is left unseen or unheard. Music is no longer a revelation of the unknown but a reinforcement of what the listener already expects.

The "drop" in electronic dance music is the musical equivalent of the pornographic reveal—a climax without foreplay, intensity without depth. Pop's three-minute formula and hyperpop's glossy distortion feed the nervous system of the achievement subject, providing stimulation that can be instantly consumed and instantly forgotten. Even ambient "focus" tracks, marketed as calming, are merely the narcotics of productivity—sound designed to erase awareness rather than awaken it. These genres embody Han's inferno of the same: repetition without reflection, exposure without intimacy, sound without silence. Their perfection is their emptiness; they leave no space for imagination or surprise.

The *no-society* in which Debussy composed knew how to wait. Its music unfolded through veiling and delay, through the erotic tension between what is heard and what remains hidden. The *achievement society*, unable to tolerate that tension, replaces it with transparency and speed. The result is music that dazzles but does not endure—a soundtrack to the restless self that cannot pause long enough to listen. We can listen to or view the works of the great masters of the era of the no-society, and each time, we listen or see – experience something new; experience the artists communion with the "Other." We cannot experience this with the music and art of the *achievement-society* because everything is exposed, everywhere, all at once – nothing is left to the imagination – nothing is left to linger. The song, the art, ends in one instance. We,

all at once, encounter a wall of noise – a total profusion of disconnected shapes that reveal no Otherness.

Eros thrives where there is distance; pornography begins where distance ends. In Debussy's suspended harmonies, one can still hear the world breathing — the music holding itself back, as if reluctant to name the beauty it perceives. The same breath animates Rachmaninoff's great piano concertos, especially the Second and Third. Beneath their sweeping Romantic emotion lies an architecture of restraint. Every crescendo is born from silence; every torrent of notes is framed by hesitation. Rachmaninoff understood that passion without pause is noise, and that the mind understands most clearly in the instant before the sound arrives.

In the slow movement of the Second Concerto, a single piano phrase rises, then falls into stillness, allowing the orchestra to respond from the realm of the "Other," as if completing a sentence left unfinished. The music listens to itself; it waits. This is Eros — the distance between question and answer, the magnetic pull across a gap that must not be closed. The pauses are not absences but presences: charged silences in which longing gathers its strength.

In the Third Concerto, that same tension becomes almost unbearable. The pianist reaches again and again toward resolution, but Rachmaninoff withholds it, extending the phrase beyond comfort. His silences are thresholds; they open onto something neither the performer nor the listener can fully grasp. When the final chords arrive, they do not conquer the silence — they dissolve back into it.

Rachmaninoff's art thus belongs to the last generation of composers who still believed that beauty required concealment. His music knows the ache of what cannot be said, and so it leaves room for mystery to breathe. In that space between sound and silence, Eros endures. In the relentless rhythms of the *achievement society*, one hears only the sound of its exhaustion. Within the music and art of the no-society, one hears and sees the artists communion with the other and is left with an enduring experience.

In the Adagio sostenuto of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, one enters not into melody but into atmosphere—the air itself seems to tremble. The first notes do not announce themselves; they appear, as if already in progress, like light slicing through water. Each arpeggiated chord carries a silence within it, and those silences become the true architecture of the piece. The listener feels drawn into a conversation where the speaker is not Beethoven, but something he is listening to—something vast, voiceless, and near.

What makes the Moonlight Sonata so haunting is not its beauty but its restraint. The music seems to hover on the edge of revelation, circling a mystery it never dares to touch. The pauses between phrases are not absences but presences: *the very breath of the Other*, the space in which the known world dissolves into suggestion. The melody ascends, then withdraws, as though searching for an answer that cannot be uttered in sound. In those moments, Beethoven's music becomes something greater than itself. We do not hear a man composing; we hear a consciousness listening at the threshold of silence.

The sonata's closing notes do not resolve—they vanish. They leave behind the feeling that something has been said but not finished, that a door has been left ajar between the human and the ineffable. It is as if the Other, having spoken through Beethoven's hand, now slowly steps back into its own darkness, whispering only: I am still here. The piece does not end; it withdraws, like light fading into itself.

To hear the *Moonlight Sonata* is to witness communion rendered audible. Each note reaches into opacity, each rest holds the tension of encounter. Beethoven's genius was not only in invention but in reverence—in knowing when to let silence speak. Through him, we hear what the *achievement society* has forgotten: that music's truest power lies not in sound, but in what sound unveils and then leaves unsaid. In that final, lingering resonance, Eros still breathes—the ache of the unknown that will not close its door.

The erotic artist and composer, like the contemplative mind in the Buddha's teaching, work through non-clinging. Each stroke or note arises, changes, disappears. There is no fixation on outcome, no craving for permanence. The process itself is revelation. Such art mirrors the state of *sati*—mindfulness—that meets reality as it is, not as it should be. The creation that emerges from this awareness carries a stillness within it, even in movement; it points beyond itself because it was born in dialogue with what cannot be grasped.

By contrast, the pornographic artist and composer operate from *taṇhā*—craving. The canvas or the song must yield a result; the process must end in validation. There is no room for silence, no patience for failure. Each mark or note must signify mastery. The result may dazzle, but it does not live. It is the image of control, not of encounter.

In this way, the studio and the concert hall become microcosms of civilization itself. The question of how we create is inseparable from how we see—and hear. The artist who meets the canvas or the silence as Other restores the possibility of Eros in a world of sameness. The one who treats the medium as an extension of ego reproduces the very inferno Han describes.

Art, then, becomes a spiritual act—not in the sentimental sense, but in the literal sense of restoring spirit to matter. To paint or compose with Eros is to reawaken the world's otherness; to create without it is to confirm its disappearance. The blank canvas and the un-played note are both tests and teachers: they reveal whether the mind before them seeks possession or communion.

In that meeting, we glimpse the wider human condition. The *achievement society* trains us to produce, display, and consume even our own inner lives. But before a silent canvas—or before the first trembling note—we are returned to the ancient choice: to exploit or to listen, to grasp or to see. In the first, the world becomes mirror; in the second, it becomes miracle.

Canvass Devoid of the Other

In the *no-society*, creation was a slow conversation with the unseen. Every work of art carried within it the echo of something withheld. Silence, space, and incompletion were not failures—they were the conditions through which meaning could appear. The artist knew that to create was to court mystery. That world has receded. The modern *achievement society*, the *yes-society*, has turned the canvas into a mirror. What once beckoned toward the beyond now reflects only the self.

The canvass devoid of the "Other" is not empty—it is crowded. It hums with affirmation, with the restless insistence that everything be visible, shareable, optimized. The creative act, once an encounter with alterity, becomes self-promotion. The artist does not listen; the artist announces. The work no longer seeks revelation but attention. What was once offering has become output.

Music reveals this most clearly. Where the no-society lingered in the half-light of suspension—Debussy, Mahler, or Satie inviting the listener into uncertainty—the *yes-society* fills every silence with rhythm and reward. Pop, EDM, trap, hip-hop and hyperpop are not merely genres but psychological architectures: their repetition, compression, and instant gratification mimic the digital feed that shaped them. The song must seize attention – hook the listener - before the second bar, climax before the mind can wander. Nothing may be left unresolved, for ambiguity is anathema to the dopamine economy.[32] The listener is not invited into wonder but trained for response. The result is music that stimulates without deepening, that ends without lingering.

In painting, the *no-society* artist approached the canvas as a threshold between seen and unseen. Brushstrokes were gestures of listening. The *yes-society* painter works in a marketplace of immediacy: images optimized for screens; brightness calibrated to algorithmic favor. The slow dance of pigment and perception has given way to the speed of digital spectacle. Color is no longer a

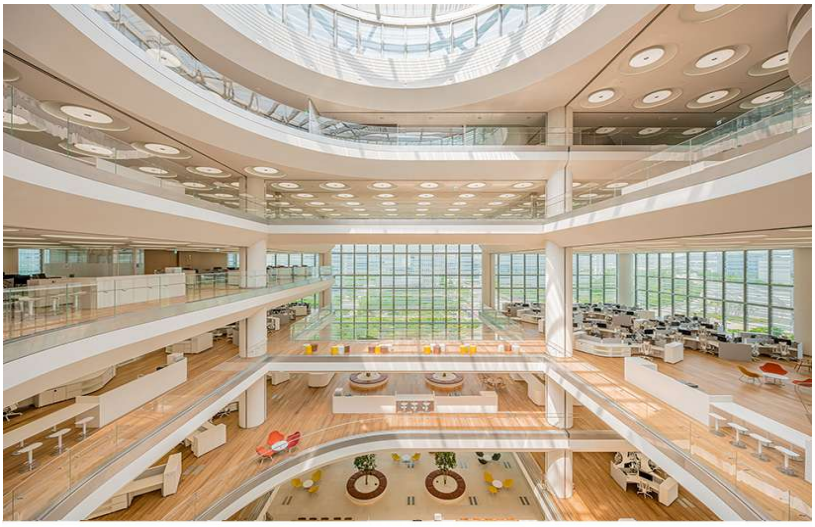
medium of meditation but a lure. In this visual abundance, we are starved for vision. Everything is shown, but nothing is seen.

Architecture once shaped stillness. The *no-society* built with reverence for shadow and endurance.[33] Stone arches, cloisters, courtyards—spaces designed to humble the inhabitant before proportion. The modern *achievement society* has inverted the purpose. Transparency is the new sanctity. Glass replaces stone, openness replaces enclosure, visibility replaces repose. The skyscraper proclaims efficiency; it glows with the light of self-display. Yet in that radiance, nothing shelters. The body has nowhere to rest from exposure. The cathedral, like the castle, offered transcendence through concealment; the office tower offers only reflection.

One example of the *no-society* architecture I chose is Chatsworth House because it embodies the ethos of the *no-society* because it is architecture as ritual and relationship.[34] Designed by William Talman in the late 1600s for the 1st Duke of Devonshire, it was conceived not as a private display of genius but as a physical expression of continuity—between generations, between humanity and nature, and between rank and responsibility. Every element—the symmetrical façades, the ordered gardens by Capability Brown, the grand staircases and galleries—served to choreograph social and domestic ritual. The architecture framed life rather than performing it. Its purpose was to sustain rhythm, hierarchy, and belonging; it invited people to dwell within shared forms of meaning. Beauty here arises from proportion and restraint, from the house's harmony with time and landscape.

William Talman-Chatsworth House -1700s

The example of the *yes-society* architecture I chose to highlight the perspective and focus of the present age is Norman Foster's 30 St Mary Axe (the "Gherkin," completed 2004), which epitomizes the achievement- or *yes-society* because it is architecture as performance and visibility.[35] Constructed of steel and glass, it reflects not the rhythms of communal life but the logic of global capitalism—speed, innovation, transparency, exposure. Its curving skin and light-filled atrium symbolize the self-confidence of the corporate world that built it. Rather than orienting its occupants in ritual or continuity, it projects a brand: progress, efficiency, individuality. It is less a dwelling than an icon, a sculptural advertisement of modern success. Where Chatsworth's architecture invited participation in a stable order, Foster's tower demands attention in a restless marketplace of images.



Norma Foster-Glass Tower - 2004

Poetry, too, bears the mark of disappearance. Once, words gestured toward what could not be said. Language was the veil through which the ineffable was glimpsed. The *yes-society* poet, conditioned by instant visibility, cannot abide opacity. Verse becomes confession, slogan, or content—language stripped of silence. The image no longer hints; it declares. Poetry collapses into self-expression, mistaking transparency for truth. The inwardness that once linked poet and cosmos dissolves into autobiography. The poem no longer points beyond the writer; it circles back, closing the loop of the self.

An example of this is brought to the fore by the following two poems. The first by William Wordsworth and the second by Sylvia Plath.

William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" (1798)[36]

Once again do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
Which on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.

This is poetry as ritual recollection. The speaker returns to a remembered place, not to exhibit emotion but to re-enter a rhythm larger than himself—the cycles of nature, memory, and moral reflection. The landscape serves as a mirror of continuity: nature endures, and through its endurance, the mind finds balance. The poem's regular cadence and long contemplative sentences enact the very order it praises.

Wordsworth's consciousness moves outward before it moves inward; he listens before he speaks. The poem's grammar is ceremonial—each clause unfolding with patience. It reflects a world that still knows pauses, boundaries, and shared silence. His "I" is porous, receptive, a vessel for connection. This is the architecture of dwelling in relation.

Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus" (1962)[37]

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

Here, form has become theatre. The speaker performs the self on a stage of visibility, each stanza a flash of light. The rhythms are jagged, enjambed, compulsively self-referential. Unlike Wordsworth's communion, this is confrontation. The poem feeds on its own intensity, its awareness of being seen. It embodies the achievement-society condition: to exist is to perform, to shock, to command attention. The inward gaze has turned carnivorous; emotion becomes spectacle. Plath's art is brilliant but isolating—her "I" consumes all light around it. The poem's energy is acceleration without resolution, exposure without dwelling.

Literature follows the same contraction. The *no-society* novel explored the labyrinth of consciousness—Dostoevsky's contradictions, Woolf's interiors, Proust's memory, Conrad's moral fog. Each demanded time, uncertainty, and surrender. The yes-society reader cannot surrender. Narrative must now be bingeable,

its meaning pre-digested. Complexity becomes inconvenience; reflection, risk. What was once an exploration of mind, becomes simulation—stories crafted for consumption rather than communion. The reader no longer enters another world but scrolls through a mirror of their own desires – everything is relatable back to the mirror of self.

The Architecture of Thought

Even thought itself has changed its architecture. The philosopher of the *no-society* wrote as if chiseling stone—each sentence an attempt to wrestle truth from opacity. The thinker of the *yes-society* performs clarity but with no connection. Complexity must be curated into accessibility; every insight becomes a post, every paradox a brand. The very medium of thought, language, is flattened into the grammar of persuasion. Ideas no longer evolve in solitude but compete in visibility. Philosophy becomes public relations for the intellect.

The result is not abundance but erosion. The *yes-society* has perfected the art of exposure, yet its works feel transient, exhausted at birth. The music fades the moment it ends; the poem vanishes when it is shared. What was once a revelation of otherness has become a symptom of sameness. We no longer produce works that endure; we produce experiences that refresh. The world has become an infinite scroll of beginnings without depth.

In the *no-society*, philosophy resembled a cathedral. Each thinker worked like a mason—laying stone upon stone, not for display but for endurance. The work of thought was not self-expression but contribution to a structure larger than any single life. Philosophy was a public edifice built to shelter humankind's questions about being, knowledge, virtue, and order.

The *no-society* philosophers—Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, and later Wittgenstein and Heidegger—sought to map the architecture of existence itself.[38] Their inquiries were immense and impersonal. Plato imagined the realm of Forms, eternal patterns that gave shape to all experience. Aristotle

dissected the world's causal anatomy, building the first great taxonomy of knowledge. Kant located the conditions of human understanding not in whim or culture, but in the *a priori* structures of reason that make the world intelligible at all. Even when these thinkers disagreed, they shared a faith that truth was out there—that mind and world could meet in lawful relation.

Their prose often feels heavy to modern eyes because it was written for weight-bearing. Each sentence was meant to hold time, to resist decay. They wrote with the awareness that thought, once loosened from ritual and precision, might lose its power to orient humankind. Their philosophies were slow architectures of coherence. They asked not "Who am I?" but "What is reality, and how does the human being dwell within it?"

Then the scaffolding shifted. Modernity unmoored the philosopher from the temple and placed them before the mirror. The twentieth century's disintegration of shared meanings—industrialization, world war, mass media—produced a new species of thought: agile, self-reflective, performative. The philosopher became less a builder of worlds than a narrator of selves.

In the *achievement society*, philosophy turned inward and downward, its gaze captured by the very subject it once transcended. Thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, and Byung-Chul Han himself inhabit this altered landscape. Sartre declared that existence precedes essence—the self must invent itself anew each moment.[39] Foucault mapped the invisible architectures of power shaping identity, sexuality, and discourse.[40] Han diagnoses the fatigue of freedom itself, the exhaustion of a species that has made self-optimization its creed.[41]

These are brilliant minds, but their brilliance flickers rather than glows steadily. Their concern is no longer with the order of the cosmos but with the maintenance of the self, inside a restless social machine. Their philosophy mirrors the digital age's architecture: glass walls, fluid boundaries, transparency without interiority. It is lucid but fleeting, conceptualized for circulation rather than for permanence.

The contrast is not a matter of intellect but of ontology. The philosophers of the *no-society* lived in a world that assumed an external order—the idea that truth, goodness, and beauty existed independently of our moods. The philosophers of the *yes-society* inhabit a world where order has collapsed into performance; meaning must be fabricated anew, endlessly. The former studied the conditions of being; the latter, the conditions of becoming. One built the cathedral of knowledge; the other lives in its glass atrium.

In the earlier age, philosophy helped humankind understand its place in the vast and ordered web of existence. In our age, it teaches the individual how to survive exposure. The *no-society* philosopher asked, "What is the world?"; the *achievement-society* philosopher asks, "How can I endure myself?" The first sought coherence between mind and cosmos; the second seeks coherence between identity and image.

Thus, the trajectory of Western thought mirrors the transformation of its architecture and its art—from the carved stone that outlived its maker to the mirrored façade that reflects only the passer-by. The older philosophers built thought to be inhabited; the modern ones design it to be seen. What we call progress may simply be the migration of attention—from the stars above to the self's glassy reflection below.

The Last Humanists

Not all philosophers of the *achievement society* joined its celebration of progress and personal freedom. Some stood at the margins, watching as the noise of self-performance drowned out the quiet murmur of genuine relation. These were the last humanists—thinkers who sensed that the modern world was exchanging communion for connection, and who raised a warning before silence became impossible.

Erich Fromm and Byung-Chul Han form the poles of this lineage. Fromm wrote in the middle of the twentieth century, when industrial capitalism was converting persons into products. He saw

freedom unmoored from ethics curdling into isolation. In *The Sane Society* and *The Art of Loving*, he diagnosed the new pathology of the age: man, detached from tradition and ritual, no longer knows who he is except as something to be marketed. His antidote was a return to love as an art of being—a disciplined form of attention that heals separateness without domination.[42] Love, for Fromm, was not sentimentality but craftsmanship: the slow practice of communion.

Han, writing in the twenty-first century, inherits the world Fromm foresaw. His essays, terse and glacially clear, dissect a civilization of self-exposure. Where Fromm's patient voice still trusted in the possibility of renewal, Han's prose arrives from the exhaustion that follows too much light. In *The Agony of Eros* and *The Burnout Society*, he describes a culture that mistakes connection for presence and transparency for truth.[43] The individual is no longer repressed but over-illuminated—burned out by the imperative to show, share, and achieve. His plea for the recovery of Eros is a call to restore the capacity to be moved by the "Other," to dwell again in the mystery of relation.

But Fromm and Han are not alone. They stand within a constellation of thinkers—Buber, Arendt, Camus, Weil—who, each in a different register, sounded the same alarm. Martin Buber, in *I and Thou*, defined human life as dialogue: the I–Thou encounter in which the self awakens through presence, not possession.[44] His world still assumed that meaning arises between beings, not within isolated consciousness. Hannah Arendt, watching the political degradations of the twentieth century, argued that the loss of public life—the shared space of speech and action—was erasing our very capacity for reality. Her *Human Condition* defends the arena of genuine appearance against the glare of spectacle.[45] Albert Camus turned that defense inward. Confronted with absurdity, he refused both nihilism and faith; his humanism rests on solidarity born of struggle. To rebel, for Camus, is to affirm the human bond even when meaning dissolves.[46] Simone Weil, perhaps the purest of them all, translated that rebellion into attention—her sacred term for the act of seeing another person without appropriation.[47] In attention,

she wrote, "love of neighbor and love of God are one and the same." Each of these thinkers, in their own way, tried to preserve a world where the self does not stand alone before its reflection.

Together they form the moral architecture of the twentieth century's twilight: pillars still holding under the weight of acceleration. They write from a time when thinking itself was still a gesture of care, when philosophy was measured not by virality but by its capacity to deepen being. Their humanism is not sentimental; it is tragic. They knew that the great systems had collapsed and that the new gods—technology, productivity, visibility—offered no solace. Yet they insisted that meaning survives wherever two beings meet without exploitation.

Placed in sequence, they mark the slow dusk of the *no-society*. Fromm belongs to its evening, still trusting that consciousness can be repaired through love. Han belongs to its aftermath, mapping the ruins with surgical clarity. Between them, Buber, Arendt, Camus, and Weil carry the last torches of dialogue, empathy, and shared presence. Their message converges: without the courage to encounter the "Other," the world itself disappears into data.

They are the last humanists before acceleration—the last to believe that philosophy should heal the space between us rather than decorate the self. Each, in his or her way, reminds us that the essence of being human is not production but relation, not exposure but communion. In their writings, the old architecture of thought still stands, fragile but upright, waiting for someone to remember how to dwell within it.

Each of these philosophers rang the warning of humanity's disconnection to the "Other." In the canvass devoid of the "Other," nothing resists us. And because nothing resists, nothing transforms us. The self moves across surfaces, gleaming, efficient, unpierced. The *no-society* endured anxiety, guilt, and restraint—but in its resistance, it found grace. The *yes-society* abolishes the negative and inherits its ghost: exhaustion without meaning, freedom without wonder, visibility without presence. Its creations shimmer, but they do not shine.

To be devoid of the "Other" is to live without shadow. Light without shadow is not illumination—it is glare. The canvass of the *yes-society* gleams with this sterile brilliance. It is radiant, but it does not reveal. The artist paints quickly, the musician produces endlessly, the thinker posts constantly. The result is not art but echo: a civilization deafened by its own applause.

The Almost Forgotten Communion with the Other

The artist of the *no-society* did not speak of the "Other." They did not imagine themselves in mystical dialogue with transcendence, nor consciously theorize about alterity. They simply lived in it. Their world—its rituals, silences, and hierarchies—was already shaped by an invisible order that placed the human within something greater than itself. They may have called it beauty, divinity, or simply craft, but beneath every act of creation ran the assumption that meaning was not manufactured but discovered. The sculptor's chisel, the monk's chant, the painter's brush, the poet's ink—all moved in rhythm with something they could feel but never own.

They were, unknowingly, immersed in the "Other": the unseen ether that surrounds and infuses creation. It was not personal, not psychological—it was environmental. The rhythm of seasons, the slowness of tools, the reverence of ritual—all conspired to remind the maker that they were not the source but the instrument. To compose or build or paint was to converse with what waited to be revealed. The *negative-society* made no distinction between technique and devotion, because both required surrendering. Even arrogance had limits; it could not survive the resistance of materials or the long patience of form. The maker was tethered to mystery by necessity.

In that atmosphere, communion with the "Other" did not require belief—it was woven into the texture of life. A mason carving a gargoyle for a cathedral might not have pondered metaphysics, yet his work breathed with a humility born of scale: he knew the stones

he shaped would outlive him. The weaver of tapestries, the composer of requiems, the writer of epics—all labored under the same quiet recognition that their craft was not an act of self-expression but of participation. They shaped the visible from the invisible, the finite from the infinite. Their art did not proclaim, "I am here," but whispered, "Something greater moves through me."

The *positive-society (yes-society)* artist is no less unconscious, but of something else. Immersed in the climate of self-affirmation, they no longer sense the presence of that ether. The surrounding air has thinned; the horizon of meaning has folded inward. Creation has become self-referential because the self is now the only available mystery. The artist still creates, but the act has been stripped of its dimension of listening. Their tools are faster, their exposure instant, their validation external. They are not in communion with the "Other" because their world has forgotten that there is an "outside" at all. The ether that once nourished imagination has been replaced by networks of visibility—an ecosystem of mirrors reflecting only themselves – total transparency.

This loss is not a failure of talent but of atmosphere. The artist of the *positive-society* works within a cultural weather system that no longer sustains depth. Surrounded by constant affirmation, they are deprived of resistance. Every idea is shareable before it is finished, every emotion marketable before it is understood. The Other—mystery, silence, unknowability—has no oxygen in such a climate. The result is not emptiness but overproduction: a world loud with creation that no longer creates communion. The work dazzles, but it does not dwell.

The tragedy is that both artists—the one who created within the "Other" and the one who creates without it—are equally unaware of their condition. The medieval stonemason did not know he was communing with mystery; he simply obeyed the demands of stone and silence. The modern designer does not know he has lost that communion; he simply obeys the demands of relevance and reach. One worked within an ocean of meaning so vast it was invisible; the other works in an airless chamber so bright it blinds.

What distinguishes them is not belief but milieu. The first was formed in a world that still knew the value of "no"—the pause, the limit, the boundary that allows the sacred to appear. The second is formed in a world of relentless "yes"—a world where every surface must gleam, every silence must speak. The first floated in the ocean of the "Other" without knowing it; the second walks across the dried seabed, unaware that water ever existed.

To swim in the ocean of the "Other" is to live within tension—the pull between seen and unseen – resistance - self and mystery. It is this tension that gave the *negative-society* its grace, its patience, its depth, its beauty. The *positive-society*, having drained that sea, moves quickly and lightly across its surface but cannot descend. It has gained lightness and lost gravity. Its creations are reflections, not revelations; its beauty is bright, not deep.

And yet, traces of the old ocean remain—tiny pockets of depth that glimmer through the cracks: a song that pauses long enough to ache, a painting that refuses to explain itself, a poem that risks obscurity. These are the modern remnants of the Other, flickers of communion in a world that has forgotten how to bow. The artist who rediscovers them is not returning to the past but remembering the human capacity to listen—to be moved by what lies beyond the reach of the self.

For as long as there is wonder, the ocean of the "Other" is not gone. It only waits for a generation of creators willing to stop, to feel the pull beneath the surface, and to remember that creation is not the act of making something new, but of meeting what has always been there—waiting to be seen.

The art of the *negative-society*—what you find in the Dutch Masters, in Turner's storms, in Renoir's domestic warmth, and even in the early Impressionists—was still tethered to an external reality that resisted the artist. The painter met the world as something to be translated, not invented. Light, landscape, body, and form—these were presences, not ideas. The artist's task was not to dominate them but to reveal how they appeared to consciousness. The description of this result is experienced when we stand before

such works, something in us stills. We feel the weight of another mind listening to the world, and we join that listening. The pause—the lingering before the canvas—is not nostalgia; it is participation in that same act of attention. We are momentarily reminded that there is something to behold beyond ourselves.

Turner's late seascapes, for instance, are not mere displays of technique—they are dialogues with light and atmosphere. He doesn't paint the sea; he paints the way the sea consumes sight itself. Renoir, painting a garden, is not capturing leisure but the shimmer of being alive in time. Monet's water lilies, when seen closely, dissolve into abstraction, yet their abstraction is still in service to vision—he is trying to paint the experience of seeing. The Impressionists were already loosening the world from representation, but not from reverence. They were still immersed in the "Other," even if they could no longer name it.

Modern abstraction marks the turning point where that immersion begins to thin. With the early modernists—Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian—the turn inward was still spiritual. They sought pure form and color as expressions of invisible harmonies. Their work retained the ache of transcendence; abstraction was a language for the ineffable. But as the twentieth century progressed, that longing became detached from its ground. The painter ceased to converse with the unseen and began to wrestle only with the medium itself. Art became reflexive: about paint, gesture, surface, concept. What had been revelation turned into experiment.

This is not to say that abstract art cannot still touch the "Other"—some of it does. A Rothko, in silence, can open a kind of void where the viewer feels themselves dissolving into color; Agnes Martin's grids can hum with a stillness akin to prayer. But the cultural current surrounding them, the milieu of the *positive-society*, rarely allows that encounter. We stand before these works as consumers of novelty, not as witnesses of mystery. The gallery itself has changed its function—from temple to marketplace, from site of contemplation to corridor of display. Browsing modern art, the visitor's pace reveals this: a quick scan, a glance, a photo.

Movement replaces meditation. Standing before a Constable, like the "Hay Wain," the looker pauses, and contemplates.

The Dutch Masters, on the other hand, slow us down because their world still believed in weight—literal and metaphysical. Light meant grace; shadow meant mystery. Even when painting domestic interiors, they implied a cosmic order: the window admitting daylight was also the consciousness admitting truth. There is resistance in their work, a conversation between seen and unseen.

Modern abstraction, born from the logic of the *positive-society*, often lacks that resistance. It moves easily because it no longer holds anything back. Its surfaces are complete upon arrival, demanding no patience, offering no delay. The viewer moves quickly through its spaces because there is no veil to lift, no hidden source to sense. The work has been emancipated from the "Other"—and in that emancipation, impoverished of depth.

This does not condemn modern art; rather, it situates it. It reveals how art, like consciousness itself, mirrors its age. In a world allergic to opacity, the canvas has followed suit. Yet when a rare work still invites us to linger—to pause, to wonder, to fall silent—it is because, even now, some artists still unknowingly reach into the old ocean. Their brush meets resistance, and through that resistance, something speaks.

So yes, when one walks through that gallery—from the soft light of Vermeer to the pulsing geometry of modern abstraction—one is also walking across the centuries-long migration of the condition of human consciousness: from reverence to self-reference, from communion to communication, from the mystery of being seen to the demand to be visible. The difference in how long we stand before each canvas is not just aesthetic—it is temporal, civilizational. It marks the distance we have traveled from the world as "Other" to the world as mirror.

The Transformation of the Arts

One has to wonder about the slow transformation that led from the artists of the *negative-society* to those of the *positive-society*—from Turner's trembling light to Pollock's splattered gesture, from the cathedral organ, the full symphony orchestra, to the algorithmic loop, from the sentence that asked a question to the sentence that sells an emotion. The change was not abrupt; it unfolded imperceptibly, like the air thinning as one climbs a mountain. The ascent promised freedom, yet left us gasping for breath.

Once, the symphony orchestra was the embodiment of civilization's dialogue with the "Other." It was not merely a musical apparatus but a cathedral of sound—hundreds of individuals surrendering their egos to a single unfolding vision.[48] Its scale demanded discipline, hierarchy, and humility; no one player could dominate, and no note could stand alone. To perform within such a body was to experience transcendence through order—to become, quite literally, a part of something greater than oneself.

But the orchestra's grandeur depended upon the values of the *no-society*: patience, restraint, and the acceptance of limitation. Rehearsal was a ritual of refinement; silence was as essential as sound. When the first note of a symphony rose from the hush of the hall, it was an act of collective reverence—the world momentarily reassembled in harmony. The music did not flatter the listener; it demanded attention. It required that the audience, too, surrender its individuality and enter the vast, shared architecture of time.

Today, that architecture is crumbling. The great symphony orchestra, once the monarch of the musical world, has faded from cultural centrality. Its audiences have aged; its institutions struggle for survival. What has replaced it is not silence but fragmentation. The *achievement society*, impatient with scale and allergic to hierarchy, prefers the small, the mp3, the portable, the instantly consumable. The ear that once endured a forty-minute movement now seeks the two-minute loop.[49] Music has been miniaturized to match the tempo of attention. The orchestra's hundreds have been replaced by one producer and a machine.

This transformation is not progress but translation: the orchestral grandeur of the no-society transposed into the micro-tempo of the *yes-society*. Where Beethoven or Mahler once required the listener to travel through vast emotional landscapes, modern production offers constant immediacy—a flattened peak repeated endlessly. The orchestra's slow crescendos, born from the patience of many minds converging, are now compressed into digital "drops." The listener need not wait; climax is delivered on demand.

And yet, in this very loss lies a kind of diagnosis. The disappearance of the orchestra reveals how the *achievement society* has absorbed the conditions of music itself. Harmony without hierarchy, sound without stillness, presence without patience—these are the new virtues of a civilization that fears its own silence. The orchestra's decline marks not the end of music but the exhaustion of a certain way of listening: the ability to inhabit time.

In the age of transparency, even sound has been made visible—quantified in waveforms, monetized in streams.[50] The orchestra, with its invisible coordination and irreducible human complexity, stands as a relic of another metaphysics: one that believed in unseen unity. Its atrophy is therefore not just cultural but ontological. The *no-society* built sound into structure; the *yes-society* has reduced structure to sound.

Yet when we listen to a recording of a great orchestra—the swell of Mahler's Resurrection, the measured grief of Brahms, the luminous dissonance of late Stravinsky—we feel again the vanished scale of the human spirit. The music's very slowness is resistance; its vastness, an act of remembrance. The orchestra may be disappearing, but in its echoes, we still hear the murmur of what was once our most complete conversation with the "Other."

In the vacuum left by the vanishing orchestra, new forms arose, each mirroring the *yes-society's* psychology. The first was the chamber ensemble — intimate, flexible, self-contained.[51] Where the orchestra required subordination to a vast hierarchy, the chamber group values dialogue and equality. Its players converse as individuals, each voice audible, each decision negotiated. It reflects

the modern ideal of collaboration: harmony without obedience, unity without command. The music is lighter, quicker, more transparent. Its beauty lies not in immensity but in immediacy — in the intimacy of minds meeting without distance. It is the *yes-society's* first answer to the orchestra's solemnity.

Next came the electronic composer and the solitary producer — the complete inversion of the symphonic principle. No longer is music the labor of many; it becomes the production of one.[52] Technology dissolves the need for others; an entire orchestra can now be simulated from a single laptop. The artist becomes sovereign and isolated, ruler and subject in one. What was once a communion of performers is an interface between human and machine. Sound no longer emerges from air vibrating in a shared hall but from code. Its perfection is sterile; its rhythm unbroken. The audience, too, listens alone, enclosed within headphones, consuming what was once a collective experience.

This is the sonic form of the *achievement society*: efficient, self-sufficient, endlessly productive. Every sound can be edited, replaced, optimized. There is no risk, no unpredictability, no silence in which Eros might gather itself. What was once revelation has become manufacture. The music does not unfold; it refreshes.

And yet, the hunger for the old vastness persists, finding refuge in the film score — the *yes-society's* re-creation of the orchestra as spectacle.[53] In the cinema, the symphony returns, but not as an end in itself; it serves narrative and emotion, designed to synchronize perfectly with the image. The audience no longer listens; it feels. The music's grandeur survives, but its purpose has changed. Once, the orchestra revealed transcendence; now it underscores entertainment. The composer has become a technician of emotion, his symphonic language re-purposed for consumption.

These new forms are not failures, only symptoms. They reveal how the collective grandeur of the *no-society* has been absorbed into the individual psyche of the *yes-society*. The many have become one; the shared silence of the concert hall has become the private pulse of the playlist. Where once music mirrored the architecture of the cosmos, it now mirrors the circuitry of the self.

Still, when a chamber group breathes together, or when an electronic artist leaves a moment of unprogrammed quiet, or when a film score dares to pause before the image demands it, something ancient stirs. For an instant, we hear the echo of the vanished orchestra — the murmur of the world listening to itself.

These moments remind us that sound is not merely vibration but relation; that the true music of civilization has always been the dialogue between the many and the one, between the known and the unknowable.

The orchestra may have fallen silent, but the need for its silence — that vast, resonant hush before the first note — has not died. It waits beneath the noise of modernity, asking once more for the courage to begin together.

The Trajectory of Effect

The painter's journey we have already traced: from those who met the world through vision, to those who turned inward toward concept. But the same trajectory shaped every art form. In literature, the *negative-society* novelist wrote as one who still believed the world contained mysteries worth unveiling. Tolstoy, George Eliot, and Thomas Mann stood before existence as one might before a cathedral—awed, humbled, searching for proportion. Their narratives were cathedrals of consciousness: every sentence carved toward moral or metaphysical insight.[54] To read them required patience, the willingness to enter a slower rhythm of time. The page resisted haste, and the resistance itself was instructive.

Then came the fracture of the modern. With the arrival of industrial speed and psychological introspection, the novel turned inward. Proust, Woolf, and Joyce still conversed with the "Other," but through the corridors of the mind. They were the Impressionists of prose—dissolving narrative solidity to capture the shimmer of perception. Yet their dissolution still carried reverence. The mind, though fragmented, was treated as sacred terrain.[55]

By the late twentieth century, that reverence waned. The postmodern novel no longer sought truth but exposed its absence.[56] It became self-aware, ironic, clever—literature about literature, text about text. The writer's communion with the "Other" was replaced by a conversation with the mirror. Fiction ceased to ask "What is real?" and began to ask "Who is watching?" The reader, like the gallery visitor before an abstract canvas, moves more quickly now. The novel no longer demands surrender, only attention. What was once pilgrimage has become consumption.

Poetry tells the same story in miniature. In the *negative-society*, the poet wrote as intermediary—one who translated the ineffable into sound. The Romantics listened to nature as if it were a voice speaking through them. Even the modernists—Yeats, Eliot, Rilke—though fractured by doubt, still wrote from the ache of the "Other." Their language shimmered with absence; every line hinted at something unsayable just beyond reach. The silence after the poem was part of its meaning.

Today, the poem has been domesticated. In the *positive (yes)-society*, poetry is a performance of the self—swift, confessional, therapeutic. The line no longer conceals mystery; it declares opinion. Ambiguity is mistaken for obscurity, and obscurity for failure. The poet no longer listens for a voice beyond the self, but amplifies the self until nothing else can be heard. The reader, conditioned by clarity and speed, no longer lingers in the dark between metaphors. The poem must deliver instantly or risk being dismissed. The sacred tension between word and silence collapses into the ease of statement. The page is bright, but it does not burn.

Music underwent the most dramatic metamorphosis of all. The *negative-society* still understood music as an offering—its compositions built to carry the soul beyond itself. Bach's fugues were architectures of devotion; Mozart's symmetries reflected an order felt to be divine; Beethoven's sonatas turned suffering into transcendence.[57] Each work assumed that harmony mirrored the structure of existence itself. To compose was to listen for the patterns of creation.

Even in the late Romantic and Impressionist eras—Mahler's vast symphonies, Debussy's dreamlike motifs—music retained this sense of conversation with the unseen.[58] The composer spoke to what could not answer, and in that unanswered space, beauty was born. The silence between notes was inhabited; it vibrated with expectation.

Then came the modern and postmodern collapse. Harmony dissolved, not as rebellion alone but as exhaustion. Schoenberg's atonality, Stravinsky's rhythmic violence, Cage's silence—all were cries from a culture losing its reference point.[59] They did not abandon the "Other" out of arrogance but out of despair: they could no longer hear it. What followed was the democratization of sound—the *positive-society's* dream of endless accessibility.

Music became reproducible, portable, disposable. The sacred act of listening became background to production, study, and motion. The song's function shifted from revelation to regulation: it manages mood, fills silence, sustains performance.

Today, sound is engineered rather than composed. The beat drop replaces the revelation; the chorus repeats like a dopamine trigger. The listener no longer enters the music; the music enters the listener's nervous system.[60] It does not expand consciousness but anesthetizes it. The Other, once encountered in a concert hall's hush, has been replaced by algorithmic feedback—intimacy quantified by streams and likes. The music moves faster, but we move less deeply.

Through all these transformations—painting, poetry, literature, music—the pattern is the same. The *negative-society* created in dialogue with resistance; the *positive-society* creates in the echo of its own affirmation. The earlier artist labored under the gravity of mystery, the later under the glare of visibility. One sought revelation through limits; the other seeks validation through exposure.

And yet, in each art form, the possibility of communion remains dormant. Occasionally, a contemporary work still opens the old space. A minimalist score that breathes, a poem that risks silence, a

novel that wanders instead of racing, a canvas that invites rather than announces—each carries the faint scent of the ocean we once swam in. Such works remind us that art's deepest function is not to entertain, impress, or even to innovate, but to restore relationship: between self and world, sound and silence, presence and absence.

To wonder about this transformation, then, is not nostalgia—it is diagnosis. The speed of modern creativity, its ceaseless output, conceals a quiet depletion: the loss of the invisible companion that once met us in every act of making. The artist of the *negative-society* did not know they were communing with the "Other;" the artist of the positive-society does not know they have lost that communion. The difference is not of skill or intention but of air. One breathed mystery; the other breathes performance. One built cathedrals of sound and word; the other builds mirrors of light.

Yet art, like consciousness, remembers. Somewhere beneath the glittering surfaces, the old conversation waits—patient, silent, and unforgotten. It waits for the moment when a hand, a voice, a line of language once again pauses long enough to listen.

Chapter 8 – The Anguish of Eros

> *"Desire dies not from lack of objects, but from lack of distance."*
>
> — Dipobhāsadhamma

When there is distance, there is longing, curiosity, the magnetism of the unknown. Desire lives in the interval between the self and what it does not yet possess. The moment everything becomes immediate, visible, and consumable, that vital tension collapses. The object of desire loses its mystery and becomes merely another extension of oneself.

Byung-Chul Han argues that in the "achievement" or "transparency" society, we have abolished this distance.[1] The Other is no longer truly other—it's reflected back as a variation of the same self: similar opinions, algorithmically filtered tastes, predictable bodies, predictable emotions. In such a flattened world, desire cannot survive because nothing resists us, nothing beckons us from beyond our own horizon.

In terms that align with the Buddha's philosophy, this is akin to saying that craving feeds on the illusion of separation—but when everything is treated as an object for gratification, craving becomes gluttonous and empty.[2] The more we grasp, the less we feel. True encounter, whether erotic, artistic, or spiritual, depends on a delicate balance: proximity without possession, intimacy without absorption.

So, the line "*Desire dies not from lack of objects, but from lack of distance*" names the modern tragedy: abundance without mystery, connection without depth, and a world so close to us that we can no longer reach for it.

Eros and pornography—these two words, when seen in their deeper meaning, describe not only the conditions of love but of civilization itself. Eros is the movement toward what is beyond oneself; the Other; the yearning that bridges separation and gives birth to beauty, thought, and communion. Pornography, in its true sense, is the annihilation of that movement: the flattening of distance, the conversion of mystery into visibility, the reduction of

the world to what can be consumed; everything exposed, transparent, everywhere, all at once.[3]

In the *no-society*, as Han calls the earlier world of restraint and discipline, Eros still breathed.[4] Life carried a rhythm of negation—pause, silence, waiting—through which depth could form. The Other was present everywhere: in the face of a stranger, the patience of ritual, the unfinished phrase of a poem. Artists, philosophers, and builders of that era created from the tension between what could be expressed and what must remain hidden. The Gothic arch, the sonata, the sonnet, the temple—all were acts of Eros: gestures reaching toward the ineffable. They were not displays of self but dialogues with the unseen. Eros gave form to the human longing for transcendence, and from that longing arose art that outlived its makers.

The *achievement society*, by contrast, has replaced this longing with visibility. What cannot be shown is dismissed as irrelevant; what cannot be quantified, as nonexistent. Its religion is performance, its sacrament is exposure. In this world, Eros withers because there is no space left for the Other. Every experience is brought into the light of sameness and stripped of its veils. The result is what Han calls the pornographic age—not because it obsesses over sex, but because it exposes everything.[5] It is the civilization of overexposure: the compulsive need to display, the inability to conceal, the fear of silence.

The decline of Eros has taken with it the great arts of contemplation. Architecture no longer aspires to eternity but to novelty, practicality and expediency; music is engineered for repetition, not revelation. Philosophy has lost its awe, literature its shadow. The very idea of greatness becomes suspect, for greatness requires distance—requires the humility to face what exceeds the self.[6] The *achievement subject*, trapped in perpetual self-promotion, cannot create in this way. It produces content, not art; information, not wisdom. Its creations shimmer for a moment in the marketplace of attention and vanish without trace.

The *no-society* was not freer, but it preserved the negative—the fertile resistance through which form arises.[7] Its rituals and prohibitions, its codes of conduct, even its silences, all served to hold the space where Eros could dwell. The *achievement society* has abolished that space in favor of transparency, speed, and affirmation. It has achieved visibility at the cost of depth.

Thus, the panorama divides: The *no-society* created worlds because it still knew how to withhold. The *achievement society* consumes worlds because it cannot stop revealing. The first lived by Eros, the second by pornography. One built the cathedral to mystery; the other builds mirrors for the self.

To recover Eros is to remember how to meet the Other again—in art, in thought, in life. It is to rediscover the value of what remains unseen: the pause before the note, the silence within the word, the blankness of the canvas before the brush descends. Civilization will not be reborn through more exposure, but through the courage to preserve the hidden—to let the world, once again, be more than ourselves.

What Han calls the pornographic age is not a moral fall but a metaphysical one.[8] It is the moment when the light that once revealed begins to erase. The human need to know, to see, to master—once tempered by reverence for the unseen—has turned absolute. Everything must be brought into view; nothing may remain unspoken, unshared, or unknown. This compulsion toward transparency masquerades as freedom but functions as domination. It demands exposure not to understand but to control, not to illuminate but to exhaust.[9]

Pornography, in its deepest sense, is the final triumph of visibility. It is not confined to the erotic image but expands to every domain of life: the endless self-disclosure of social media, the quantified body, the surveillance of emotion, the commodification of intimacy.[10] It is the hunger to convert experience into image, presence into data, existence into performance. In this atmosphere, the Other can no longer breathe. The mysterious, the hidden, the

sacred—these are treated as threats to efficiency. The unseen is no longer revered; it is considered incomplete.

This new pornography is furtive not because it hides, but because it conceals its own totality.[11] It presents itself as liberation—openness, honesty, accessibility—while quietly abolishing the very dimension that makes liberation meaningful: interiority. The self becomes an exhibit of itself, endlessly broadcasting to prove that it exists. We are all on display, but no one is truly seen.[12] In such a world, the gaze no longer travels outward toward the Other; it loops back endlessly, trapped in the glare of self-presentation.

The completeness of this transformation is staggering. What began as the desire to render the world intelligible has culminated in a civilization allergic to opacity.[13] Every mystery must be explained, every process accelerated, every silence filled. Even art, once the last refuge of ambiguity, now submits to the demand for visibility. The painting must be shareable, the poem quotable, the song immediately gratifying. The purpose of expression is no longer revelation but replication—proof of participation in the collective display. The artist's communion with the Other has been replaced by an algorithmic communion with audience metrics.

This is why Han calls it the inferno of the same.[14] In the saturation of light, difference dissolves. Nothing stands apart long enough to draw us into relation. Every image looks familiar, every sound interchangeable. The world becomes frictionless—and therefore depthless. Pornography, in this sense, is not the excess of desire but its collapse. Desire cannot live without distance, and distance cannot exist where everything is exposed.

The new pornography is furtive precisely because it feels natural. We no longer notice the disappearance of the Other because exposure has become the air we breathe. The loss is invisible—like a scent forgotten because it never leaves the room. What was once hidden in the folds of the world has been flattened into constant illumination. Even darkness is now a design feature, backlit for effect.[15]

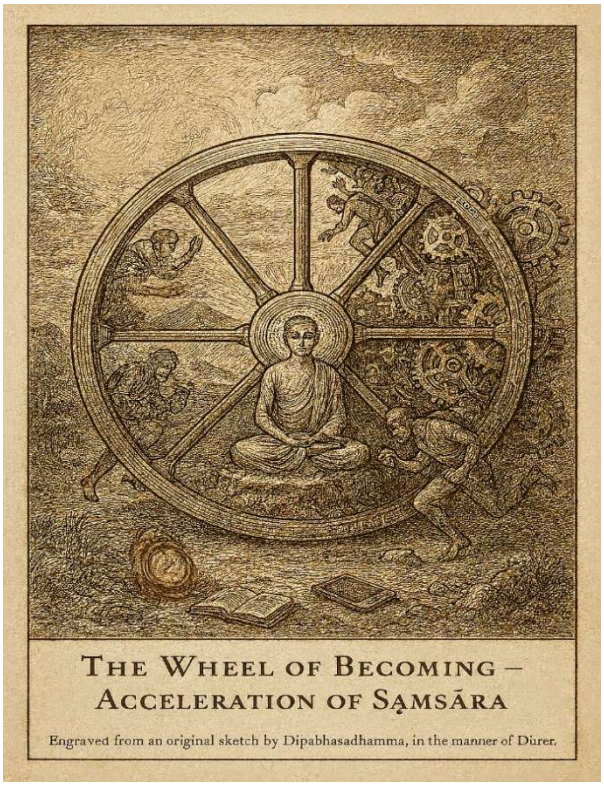
This is the completeness of the loss: Eros has not been defeated; it has been absorbed. Its yearning energy—once directed outward toward mystery—now circulates within the self, driving production, performance, and consumption. The same pulse that once built cathedrals now builds networks; the same longing that once sought communion now seeks recognition. What was once devotion has become display.[16]

And yet, beneath the glare, the hunger for shadow remains. The more absolute the exposure, the more acute the longing for concealment. We scroll through brightness, secretly desiring the dimness that would let us rest. The human being cannot live indefinitely without darkness; we wither under unbroken light. The last breath of Eros, then, may not be its end but its retreat—withdrawn to the few remaining places where silence is still possible, where the unseen has not yet been converted into content.

Eros still waits there, quiet and unobserved, in the pause before speech, in the gaze that does not demand a return, in the work that refuses to explain itself. To find it again, civilization must relearn what it has forgotten: that truth is not always visible, that love is not possession, that beauty requires a veil. The restoration of the hidden is not regression—it is resurrection. Only through the return of shadow can light recover its meaning, and only through the recovery of the unseen can Eros breathe once more.[17]

Chapter 9 - The Acceleration of Saṃsāra

> "*When the self demands to see all things, and all things become self, the mind loses the power to behold anything. What cannot be hidden cannot be loved.*"
>
> — Dipobhāsadhamma


THE WHEEL OF BECOMING –
ACCELERATION OF SAṂSĀRA
Engraved from an original sketch by Dipabhasadhamma, in the manner of Dürer.

In earlier ages, change unfolded like a tide—slow, rhythmic, almost predictable. But now, the wheel spins faster than the mind can steady itself. What was once gradual transformation has become perpetual acceleration. The modern world has taken the ancient machinery of *saṃsāra*—the cycle of craving, becoming, and suffering—and given it a souped up engine.

Byung-Chul Han might call it neuronal acceleration, the speed of inner compulsion that mirrors technological velocity.[1] The Buddha would call it *taṇhā*, the restless thirst of craving that drives

becoming (*bhava*). Both point to the same condition: beings hurling themselves through cycles of exhaustion in search of what they can never hold.[2|3]

Acceleration, busyness, constant doing, constant motion, masquerades as progress. Every moment must be filled, every task optimized, every silence conquered by noise. Yet, as the Buddha warned, craving does not lead to satisfaction—it can only lead to more craving. The modern mind, saturated by information and stimulation, has mistaken this motion for meaning. In terms of the Buddha's philosophy, this is *avijjā*—ignorance made efficient.[4|5]

In a world without pauses, reflection becomes rebellion. The person becomes the *achievement subject*, Han's weary modern archetype, resembles the being trapped in saṃsāra—the never-ending cycle of doing; driven not by outer coercion but by the inner command: "*I must*."[6] The compulsion to perform, to update, to improve, to stay visible is not unlike the ancient fear of falling into a lower realm. Both are rooted in anxiety about vanishing—of becoming irrelevant, unseen, unneeded, friendless, unloved, and alone.

Yet, as the Buddha taught, there is no real self to protect from vanishing. [7] To accelerate the illusion of self is to speed up the wheel's spin. The faster it turns, the harder it becomes to see that it turns at all.

Han's *society of fatigue* is the twenty-first century's *bhava-cakka* – the wheel of observed becoming—the ceaseless revolution of desire, action, and consequence —a samsāric treadmill where burnout is the modern form of the rebirth of craving.[8|9]

Still, not all acceleration is decay. When rightly seen, even this frantic turning can point the way to insight. The Buddha's path does not demand the rejection of speed but the awakening of awareness within it.[10] To see the motion clearly is to step outside its tyranny. One does not have to stop the world to be free from it—only to stop clinging to the constant motion.

In the quiet recognition that there is no "I" being spun, only conditions unfolding, saṃsāra slows -sanity returns.[11] Its wheel turns not with panic but with precision. A person who understands this and is awakened sees the machinery of becoming and no longer mistakes it for real life.

But what exactly do we mean by this "acceleration of saṃsāra"? What lies beneath the phrase—what secret current carries it forward unseen? To name it is not enough; we must walk into its velocity and listen with our whole minds and bodies.

The Nature of Saṃsāra

The Buddha described *saṃsāra* as a process of incessant becoming, born of ignorance and thirst – the thirst of craving.[12|13] Yet, for most of history, this process moved at the pace of breath, of seasons, slowly, of mortality itself. There were still pauses—intervals between actions—where one might feel the weight of impermanence and turn the mind toward release. But the modern world has tightened these intervals until they nearly vanish. The wheel of becoming spins so fast that the motion itself disappears into invisibility.

That is the hidden meaning of acceleration: when the process becomes so rapid it conceals its own existence. The mind believes itself standing still while being carried, without resistance, through infinite cycles of craving and gratification. The modern human is not running toward pleasure, but away from stillness. Every cellphone notification, every email update, every small "Yes" to the screen is an act of refusal—a turning away from the terrifying silence of non-becoming.

Han sees this same fear in what he calls the *positive society*, a civilization allergic to negation.[14|15] The *no* has vanished. Rejection, rest, refusal—all are treated as illness. But in the Buddha's philosophy, the capacity to say no is the beginning of wisdom: the turning away from the flame that burns without light. When every pause is pathologized, the mind is deprived of its natural

respiration. The breath of contemplation is replaced by the gasp of performance.

The acceleration of *saṃsāra*, then, is not merely technological or economic. It is spiritual in the deepest sense of the word—not divine, but psychic. The machinery of *saṃsāra* has moved inside the nervous system. Our minds, our thinking, our actions, have become energized to the point of exhaustion. The algorithms of the world and the algorithms of the mind have merged.[16|17] Each click is karma; each image, a seed of becoming. The marketplace and the mind now operate on the same fuel—attention.

And yet, within this vertigo, there is a possibility. The faster the wheel turns, the more it reveals its emptiness. When the velocity of the craving to become something collapses into pure blur, something extraordinary can occur: the recognition that the blur itself is empty, that the motion was never *mine*. The Buddha's insight was not an escape from the world's movement but an awakening to its nature.[18]

If we look carefully, we see that speed itself is suffering—not because it is evil, but because it obscures seeing things as they actually are. The modern person believes that to slow down is to fall behind, when in truth, it is the only way to catch up to what is real.

Perhaps this is what the Buddha meant by *nibbidā*—that turning away born of clarity, not disgust.[19] In a society addicted to acceleration, *nibbidā* is then, indeed, a great heresy. It is not passivity but perception; not resignation, but recognition. To feel the weariness of endless motion is to glimpse the possibility of stillness.

We stand now in the middle of the wheel's storm, surrounded by the debris of our own desire and craving to become. Yet even here, at the heart of speed, the ancient whisper endures: that the motion itself is not the problem—it is the clinging to that motion; the forgetting that the wheel has no center, and although we think it is - the center is not *me*.

To commune with this truth is to commune with the Other—the one who watches without moving, who sees the turning of worlds and yet remains untouched. That Other is not a god, not a soul, but the unconditioned awareness that the Buddha discovered beneath the noise. It waits, even now, beneath the fever of our progress, still as a pond beneath a thousand falling leaves.

The Industrialization of Craving

Desire that manifests as craving, was once a trembling within the body—a felt hunger, rising and fading with the tides of circumstance. Now, it has been digitized, distributed, and monetized. The craving that once flickered in the mind now hums through cables, pulses through silicon, and loops endlessly in the feedback systems we call connection.

White Castle's advertising uses the line: "What You Crave." Cinnamon Toast Crunch uses the line: "Crave Those Crazy Squares." Jack in the Box: "Crave Bigger." Dr Pepper: "The One You Crave." Mary Brown's: "Crave Delicious."[20|21|22|23|24] These are only a scant few examples of how craving itself has become a marketable concept.

Technology, that shimmering promise of liberation, has become the new architecture of *taṇhā - craving*.[25|26] The world no longer needs to persuade us to crave; the algorithms do it for us. Each scroll, each like, each suggestion is a karmic link—desire automated, craving industrialized. The self, once imagined as the author of its fate, has become a relay point in an economy of attention.

The Engineered Craving: Advertising and the Wheel of Becoming

Advertising rarely says crave. It doesn't need to. Its most effective work is subtler: it suggests a self you could become and a lack you must resolve—then places a product precisely at that junction.

Psychologists Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) describe this as symbolic self-completion: when individuals feel their identity is incomplete, they seek symbols—objects, titles, branded goods—that signal wholeness.[27] Modern marketing weaponizes that gap, selling not a product but a self-image in progress. The toothpaste is confidence, the car is competence, the phone is relevance. Each purchase promises a temporary completion that must soon be replaced (Wicklund & Gollwitzer 1982).

The same dynamic governs luxury consumption. Han, Nunes, and Drèze (2010) demonstrated that branded goods act as status signals—high-visibility logos serve the socially insecure, while the affluent prefer subtle markers that only insiders recognize.[28] Similarly, Nelissen and Meijers (2011) found that people displaying luxury brands receive more social cooperation, confirming that status goods yield measurable social benefit.[29] Advertising translates these findings into language of desire: "Own this, become seen." The craving is no longer for leather or gold, but for recognition itself (Han et al. 2010; Nelissen & Meijers 2011).

Neuroscientists have traced the same circuitry in the realm of appetite. Gearhardt et al. (2020) showed that adolescents viewing fast-food commercials exhibit activation in reward regions of the brain, correlating with increased consumption risk. Masterson et al. (2019) found that even static brand logos trigger reward responses in children, while Yeum et al. (2023) demonstrated that moving video ads amplify this effect compared with still images. The cue itself becomes the craving. Advertising no longer informs; it conditions (Gearhardt et al. 2020; Masterson et al. 2019; Yeum et al. 2023).[30][31][32]

Across domains, the structure is identical: stimulation of craving through anticipation rather than satisfaction. The viewer is placed in a state of becoming—just shy of fulfilment. Philosophically, this is the same motion the Buddha called *bhava*—existence in its restless mode, the engine of *saṃsāra*. The modern world has mechanized it.

In the digital age, this engine is automated. The attention-economy, as analyzed by Bhargava and Velasquez (2021), designs interfaces that capture and steer impulse, not by accident but as economic principle.[33]|[34] Vettehen et al. (2023) project this logic forward: cognitive labor, desire and even craving itself will be increasingly outsourced to algorithmic systems that anticipate and pre-shape human wants. The result is a collapse of the contemplative interval—the moment of choice between stimulus and response. The wheel spins faster; craving becomes code (Bhargava & Velasquez 2021; Vettehen et al. 2023).

Put differently: modern advertising doesn't sell objects so much as moments of becoming fueled by craving. It invites the viewer to crave not a burger or a vehicle but a stabilized identity—the powerful one, the seen one, the admired one. Relief is brief because the self being upgraded is itself a moving target. In terms of the Buddha's philosophy, the *bhava-cakka*, the wheel of becoming, has been given a motor.[35]

Yet acceleration can disclose what it conceals. When desire and craving is engineered so efficiently that the "upgrade" arrives before the longing is even named, a strange clarity can dawn: the realization that the self being upgraded is also an advertisement. Symbolic completion fails because symbols cannot complete a process whose nature is to spin.

Thus, the ethical task is not to moralize consumption but to restore the interval—to recognize the cue as cue, the image as image, the wanting as conditioned and transient.[36] Neuroscience identifies milliseconds of pre-conscious priming; contemplative awareness can stretch those milliseconds into freedom. In that space, craving is seen as craving—not as command.

Advertising will continue to hum its mantra: you could be more. The counter-move is recognition, not renunciation. To see craving clearly is to step off the rim and find the axis. The wheel still turns, but the mind no longer turns with it.

In that stillness, the *Dhamma-cakka* begins to revolve within the *bhava-cakka*—truth within becoming, perception within motion. And the modern engine of craving, once seen, becomes the teacher itself.[37]|[38]

This is what Han calls the *society of transparency*, but we might just as well call it the mechanization of becoming, the marketing of craving. The ancient process of *saṃsāra*—birth, aging, and re-becoming—has migrated into the digital realm. Every profile update, every filtered image, is a small act of rebirth, a flicker of *bhava*. Each deletion is a death. The self dies and reconstitutes itself hundreds of times a day, each iteration feeding the wheel of craving.

And beneath this churn lies a deeper pathology: the belief that visibility is being – visibility mean we exist. If, to be seen is to exist; to vanish from the feed is to die. The fear of non-existence, once reserved for philosophers and mystics, now animates ordinary lives. Yet, the Buddha's teaching resounds quietly through the static: whatever is seen, is impermanent; whatever is impermanent, is not self.

What makes the acceleration of *saṃsāra* so insidious is that it feels voluntary. We call it freedom, productivity, self-expression. But the hand that swipes – that scrolls, is bound by its own momentum. There is no tyrant here, only the intoxication of agency—I choose, therefore I am. The Buddha might smile at this, for he too saw that the greatest bondage is the belief in one's own freedom.

The industrialization of craving and desire hides another layer of tragedy: the transformation of craving into data. Each longing is harvested, each hesitation mapped, each emotional ripple translated into code. The inner world, once a sanctuary of mystery, has been made legible—its depths measured in engagement metrics. What was once invisible, sacred, unknowable—the inner Other—has been made into a marketplace.

This is the true disappearance of the negative Han mourns. When the private becomes public, when even solitude becomes performance, there is no longer an unseen space where the self

might encounter the Other. And without that encounter, love, art, and even insight begin to suffocate. The mind no longer gazes outward into mystery; it stares into its own reflection and calls it the world.

Yet even this can be seen clearly. When the Buddha taught that *avijjā*—ignorance—is the first link in dependent origination, he was not condemning blindness but describing a process. Ignorance is not a sin; it is motion without seeing. And that is precisely what our technologies have perfected. The more we know, the less we see. The flood of information blinds us not through lack, but through excess.

To awaken in such a world is no small task. The Buddha did it among the cacophony of his own time. It requires what Han's civilization has forgotten: the art of the pause. The courage to not respond, not react, not optimize. To let a thought arise and pass without feeding it. To feel desire without immediately converting it into an action. In that slender space—the unmonetized, untracked, unmeasured pause—the wheel hesitates. And in that hesitation, the whole of *saṃsāra* can be glimpsed.

The acceleration of *saṃsāra* is not an external condition to be escaped, but a mirror in which the internal process of becoming reveals itself. The faster the world turns, the more clearly one can see the spinning of one's own mind. And so, paradoxically, acceleration may yet serve the path: the speed itself can become the teacher. For when motion reaches its limit, the illusion of motion dissolves.

The Still Point

There is a moment in the turning of any wheel when the spoke aligns perfectly with its axis—neither moving forward nor back. It exists only for an instant, yet within it the entire motion rests. The Buddha called this the end of *bhava-cakka*, the stilling of the wheel of becoming.[39] The modern mind, however, knows only the blur—the ceaseless flicker of activity that mistakes movement for meaning.

To speak of stillness in such an age sounds almost indecent. The world praises the restless: productivity masquerades as purpose, and the one who pauses is suspected of weakness or withdrawal. Yet the still point is not withdrawal from life—it is intimacy with it. It is the moment when the machinery of *saṃsāra* becomes visible because one is no longer caught in its spin.

Han's fatigued subject collapses because they have lost contact with this axis. They live entirely on the rim of the wheel, where speed is greatest and perspective thinnest. Every motion is centrifugal, flinging the self outward into performance, into exposure, into exhaustion. The Buddha, by contrast, discovered the inward vector—the movement toward the center where all becoming ceases without annihilation.

Stillness is not the opposite of motion; it is its revelation. When motion is seen clearly, it slows. This is why the Buddha's first wheel—the *Dhamma-cakka*—did not crush the world's movement but illuminated it.[40] It showed that every conditioned thing (*saṅkhāra*) is in motion, and that freedom lies not in stopping the wheel but in seeing that there was never anyone turning it.[41]

The still point is not found by escaping technology, noise, or the demands of modernity. It is uncovered in the act of direct seeing: the phone vibrating, the mind reaching, the impulse arising—and in that instant, awareness awakening before the grasping completes. The pause does not deny the world; it redeems it.

In the early texts, *nibbāna* is described not as a place but as a cooling, a going out, a quenching of the fever of becoming. The word itself means *to blow out*, like a flame no longer needing fuel.[42] In the same way, when awareness sees craving as craving, the wheel loses friction. The self's velocity slows, and the great quiet—the Other you have sought to commune with—emerges not from outside but from within the motion itself.

At the still point, there is no watcher and no watched, no seeker and no found. There is only knowing. It is not mystical; it is precise. The Buddha's silence beneath the Pipal tree (Bodhi tree) was not

the silence of absence, but of completion—motion having revealed its futility, rest having revealed its depth.

This is what the acceleration of saṃsāra hides most fiercely: that the center has never moved. The wheel turns around stillness, yet the world worships the spinning. The task, then, is not to halt the age of speed but to rediscover the unmoving center within it—to live from the axis, not the rim.

To touch that still point, even for an instant, is to see the truth of Han's lament and the Buddha's liberation as the two faces of one insight: that exhaustion and enlightenment are not opposites, but different responses to the same velocity. One collapses beneath it; the other awakens within it.

The Turning of the Wheel

Since time immemorial, the wheel has always turned. Kingdoms, economies, technologies—each a new rim on the same old axle – a new tire fitted onto an off-kilter rim attached to an off-balanced axle. What is unique about our age is not that we turn, but that we no longer see the turning. The noise of acceleration has drowned out the hum of recurrence. Han hears this as fatigue—the weariness of beings who have forgotten the center – or at the very least, don't realize the axle is out of alignment. The Buddha heard it as *dukkha*—the ache of becoming without understanding why.

To see the wheel is the beginning of freedom. This was the first truth ever taught after the Buddha's awakening, the moment he *set in motion the Dhamma-cakka* (the wheel of truth).[43] That turning did not add another rotation to the cosmic machinery; it revealed the axis around which it spun. Where the *bhava-cakka* (the wheel of becoming) is driven by craving, the *Dhamma-cakka* (the wheel of truth) is turned by insight. The one binds through motion; the other liberates through vision.[44]|[45]

Modern civilization has perfected the outer wheel but neglected both the axel and the hub. It accelerates becoming without ever asking what it is that becomes. It multiplies identities, desires, and data—each a spoke on a wheel that knows no rest. The Buddha's

response is not to abandon the world but to reorient perception: to shift from spinning at the rim to abiding at the center. Awareness does not escape motion; it absorbs it, transforms it into understanding.

Every act of mindfulness is a small revolution of the *Dhamma-cakka* within the mind. To pause amid speed, to feel without immediately interpreting, to allow experience to complete itself without grasping—these are not retreats but turnings. Each restores the lost interval; each cools the fever of progress. When Han speaks of the *tired self*, he describes a consciousness trapped in the bhava-cakka, mistaking exhaustion for existence. The Buddha offers another possibility: *vīriya*, right effort—not the restless striving of achievement, but the steady energy of awakening.[46]

The modern self, exhausted by its own productivity, stands at a threshold similar to that of the ascetics who once turned away from sensual indulgence. Having mastered the outer world, we now face the inner one. The question is no longer how fast can we go, but why are we going at all? This question, simple yet subversive, is the first crack in the surface of *saṃsāra*. Through it, light enters—the same light that once fell on the Bodhi tree at dawn.

In the end, the acceleration of *saṃsāra* is only frightening to the one who believes they are being carried along. The awakened mind sees that the wheel turns by causes and conditions, not by command. It is neither to be worshipped nor resisted, but understood. The true revolution is not outward but inward: when understanding arises, the entire mechanism loses its authority.

Han's world spins toward transparency; the Buddha's world opens toward clarity. The two are not the same. Transparency exposes, but clarity illuminates. One reveals surfaces; the other penetrates appearances. Where Han sees fatigue, the Buddha points to release—not by slowing the wheel, but by seeing through it.

And so, the wheel turns still, but something has changed. The center has been found. The movement of the world no longer dictates the movement of the mind. Stillness and motion coexist—

the axis unmoved, the rim in endless flight. This is the turning of the wheel.

Yet the first touch of stillness often brings fear. When the mind begins to steady, the world it once knew seems to unravel. The noises that once confirmed existence fall silent, and in that silence, something vast and unfamiliar appears. It is not annihilation, nothing is wrong, but to the untrained heart it feels like falling into emptiness – uncertainty, shakiness, a fear of the unknown.

Do not mistake this fear for failure or that something isn't right. It is the vertigo of awakening—the body's protest against balance after lifetimes of spinning on a misaligned axle. Having moved so long upon the rim, the stillness of the axis feels unnatural. But it is here, in this strange quiet, that understanding begins.

The wheel has not vanished; it simply no longer commands. The world continues to turn, yet the mind no longer turns with it. What once seemed loss reveals itself as release. Fear is the final shadow cast by ignorance before the dawn of clarity. So, to feel the world come undone is to feel the truth begin to weave itself anew. This is not discovery of something new, just the recognition of something that always was. This is how the *Dhamma-cakka* (the wheel of truth) begins to turn within—the same wheel, but now moved by wisdom, not by craving.

From Burnout to Awakening

Every age has its sickness. Ours is not plague or famine but restlessness—an illness of velocity. Han calls it burnout, the exhaustion that comes not from oppression but from overproduction of the self.[47] The Buddha would recognize it instantly: the fever of becoming, the fatigue born of craving what cannot satisfy. Yet every sickness also carries its cure. When the mind grows weary of acceleration, when even success tastes of ashes, a new question begins to surface—the same one that stirred under the Pipal tree (Bodhi tree): Is there an end to this turning?

Burnout, if seen clearly, can ripen into awakening. It is the *First Noble Truth* announcing itself through the body: this is *dukkha*.[48] To recognize it is not defeat but insight. For what collapses in fatigue is not life itself but the delusion that we can hold it still. And so, the wheel that once enslaved becomes the teacher. Out of exhaustion grows the possibility of rest; from the recognition of endless becoming arises the longing for cessation. The same force that drives the modern world toward burnout can, if seen rightly, drive the mind toward release.

Chapter 10 – From Burnout to Awakening

"*When the fire finds no more fuel, it goes out by itself.*"[1]

-Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli

The Nostalgia for the No-Society

Those of us who were born before the rise of the *achievement society* remember a world that moved more slowly, where life was stitched together by small obligations, rituals, and the dependable rhythm of human contact. In the *no-society*, one's worth was not yet indexed to output. To be was more important than to become. The rules could be confining, but they also offered ballast: manners, customs, Sunday meals, the quiet pride of doing a job well for its own sake. One's life was not a performance but a continuity.

It is easy to romanticize that past, but nostalgia itself is diagnostic. When the elders speak fondly of the "good old days," they are not pining for rotary phones or ration books; they are longing for solidity. The no-society, for all its rigidity, still gave people a sense that there was an order of things larger than themselves. One did not have to invent an identity each morning. There was a given world to inhabit.

The *achievement society* dismantled that world and replaced it with freedom—freedom so absolute it quickly became compulsion. The old prohibitions dissolved, and in their place arrived endless possibility. What was lost was not only community but a shared sense of enough. To the older mind, raised in scarcity and moderation, today's abundance feels strangely hollow. Choice has multiplied, but meaning and purpose has thinned.

When people of my generation say they wish to return, what they truly desire is not a restoration of the past but relief from acceleration. They miss the pauses between things—the gaps where reflection once lived. In the *no-society*, boredom and patience still had a place. There was time to digest experience, to let emotion ripen into understanding. The *achievement society* has no such

intervals; it treats stillness as error – it feels wrong – and is filled with anxiety.

So, the nostalgia is not naïve; it is intuitive. It recognizes, however vaguely, that a vital human equilibrium has been lost. The elder's sense that life without restraint is not freedom but fatigue. They long for the discipline that quietly supported sanity—the tacit social mindfulness that the Buddha would have recognized as *sīla*, ethical composure.[2]

I, too, feel that longing. It is not a wish to reverse history but to recover inwardly what that older order once provided outwardly: a rhythm slow enough to let understanding arise. In the vocabulary of the Dhamma, the *no-society* still allowed for *sati*—mindfulness — attention to the moment as it is.[3] The *achievement society*, by contrast, disperses attention into perpetual anticipation – perpetual craving – perpetual wanting.

Perhaps this explains why memory itself becomes a refuge. The past appears peaceful not because it was simpler, but because we were still capable of presence within it. What we miss is not the time, but the capacity to dwell in time without fleeing it – without feeling that time was our enemy.

In short: people long for the no-society because it still gave them a sense of belonging within limits. Those limits, however imperfect, created the psychological space for contentment. The *achievement society* abolishes limits and thereby abolishes rest. The yearning to "return" is really the yearning to recover the stillness that both the Buddha and the *no-society* understood, each in their own language, to be the foundation of peace.

Yet the nostalgia for the *no-society* also conceals another truth: that the world's new momentum has changed not only how we live, but how we imagine time. The *achievement society* lives under the tyranny of tomorrow. Its optimism is nervous, its progress frantic. The modern mind no longer allows the future to arrive; it insists on manufacturing it. Every plan, every forecast, every "five-year vision" is not really an act of anticipation but an act of control — an attempt to pre-empt surprise, to domesticate the unknown.

But what we call preparing for the future is, in reality, a subtle effort to neutralize it. Beneath all the talk of innovation and progress lies a deeper fear: that change might alter the conditions of our comfort. The future we strive to secure is rarely new; it is today extended indefinitely, today without disruption. The achievement subject doesn't truly want the future to come — he wants a guarantee that it will look reassuringly like the present.

Because the world now moves so quickly, this maintenance requires constant vigilance. To "stay ahead" is merely to avoid falling behind in the endless project of preserving what we already have. We plan, not because we are courageous, but because we are afraid. The velocity of modern life gives the illusion of advancement, yet most of that motion is circular — energy spent sustaining the familiar against the entropy of change.

In this sense, the *achievement society's* obsession with control is nothing other than a collective refusal to live in time. The present is consumed by anxiety over its own continuation. Reflection becomes a threat, pause an enemy. We have traded the mystery of what might be for the exhaustion of keeping what is.

The Buddha would have recognized this disease of momentum as a variant of *upādāna*, clinging.[4] The mind that grasps after security mistakes repetition for safety. But permanence, he taught, is the one thing the world does not offer. To struggle against impermanence is to generate suffering; to rest within it is to discover freedom.[5]

In the modern world, people no longer collapse beneath the weight of oppression but beneath the burden of their own performance. The philosopher Byung-Chul Han describes this condition as the *achievement subject*—a person who no longer answers to an external master but compels themselves to achieve, to produce, and to be constantly available.[6] The command is no longer "You must," but "You can." Yet this "can," becomes an unspoken tyranny, driving people to exhaustion in the name of freedom.

The fatigue that defines our age is not merely physical. It is psychological, emotional, and spiritual. It is the fatigue of a self at war with itself—a consciousness that cannot rest because it believes that resting is failure. What we call burnout is not simply overwork; it is the collapse of meaning under the pressure of constant self-improvement. The mind, overstimulated and overstretched, mistakes motion for vitality and silence for loss. We burn because we do not know how to stop burning.

This exhaustion is not only the body's protest—it is meaning itself crying out for restoration. When life is reduced to performance, purpose dissolves into repetition. We act, but no longer know why. The machinery of achievement hums so loudly that the question of "for what?" can no longer be heard. This is why the fatigue of our time feels so hollow: it is not simply tiredness, but estrangement from direction. When one no longer feels connected to anything beyond the self, every effort eventually feels absurd.

The disappearance of "the Other," as Han describes it, is the silent catastrophe of the modern psyche.[7] Without something outside the self to encounter, to listen to, or to be shaped by, consciousness turns upon itself like a wheel without traction. Once, the "Other" gave orientation—be it the face of another person, the mystery of nature, or the depth of silence that reminded us we were not alone. Now the screen reflects only the self. Our labor, our emotions, even our suffering return to us as data, as metrics of self-performance. The mirror grows brighter and emptier at once.

This absence of communion leaves the mind wandering without coordinates. The exhaustion we feel is not simply from doing too much; it is from doing without meaning. Fatigue becomes the body's way of saying what the mind refuses to admit: that life has become a closed circuit. We are tired because we cannot escape ourselves. The very technologies that promised connection have become instruments of solitude, replacing presence with visibility and understanding with reaction. The more we share, the less we are seen.

At some point, awareness of this spinning begins to dawn. We sense that something is wrong—not in the world, but in the way we inhabit it. The tiredness grows heavy and begins to whisper that our exhaustion is not a failure of endurance but of orientation. Yet because we have forgotten what it means to stand before "the Other," we cannot name what we have lost. The disconnection is profound precisely because it lacks an object. We are disconnected from what we cannot define.

It is here, in this opaque awareness of loss, that the possibility of awakening begins. The recognition that we are tired—not of work, but of ourselves—is the first spark of wisdom. The collapse of meaning can become the opening through which meaning re-enters. For when the wheel of becoming finally slows, even for a moment, the silence that follows is not empty at all—it is the first sound of truth returning.

The Buddha, twenty-five centuries ago, diagnosed this condition under another name: *dukkha*, the pervasive unsatisfactoriness of existence – life spinning on an axle of disequilibrium. For him, this restlessness is rooted in *taṇhā* (craving) and *bhava* (becoming)—the compulsion to always become something other than what we are. The ancient formula *upādāna-paccayā bhavo*— "*clinging gives rise to becoming*"—describes exactly what Han identifies in the modern self: a being enslaved by its own drive to achieve.[8] As long as we cling to the idea of who we must become, peace, purpose, and satisfaction remains unreachable.

The life of Siddhartha Gautama itself mirrors the cycle of modern burnout. He began as a man surrounded by every luxury—an existence curated for comfort and pleasure—but he found it hollow. Perhaps he experienced what the modern person experiences – a dullness of life, a sense of no purpose, a fog of consciousness. His escape from his father's comfortable home led him into the opposite extreme: a life of denial and self-punishment. For six years he starved and tormented his body because, at the time, this was thought to be the way to get answers – everyone else was doing it – everyone was in pursuit of spiritual perfection. He lived this way until his physical and mental strength was nearly gone.[9]

Then came a moment of clarity. He saw that this striving, even for holiness, was the same fever that drove his earlier life of indulgence. Both were forms of craving. Exhausted, he sat beneath the Pipal tree (Bodhi tree)—not to win enlightenment, but to stop running. There, in complete stillness, he awoke. The fever – the craving of becoming, had ended.[10]

This discovery became what he later called the Middle Way—a path between indulgence and denial, between the endless stimulation of the world and the self-destructive attempt to escape it.[11] The Middle Way is not moderation in the casual sense; it is detoxification. It releases the mind from its addiction to becoming. It does not reject the world but ceases to depend on it for identity. Han speaks of the *weariness of positivity*, the exhaustion that comes from saying "yes" to everything.[12] The Buddha answered with a liberating "no": the refusal to feed craving, the cooling of the fire. This is the value of the negative, the restriction of what only appears to be positive, but in truth is poison.

That cooling begins with *nibbidā*—a word often translated as "disenchantment." It is not disgust or aversion, but the natural fading of desire once its futility is seen clearly. Modern people might mistake *nibbidā* for apathy, yet it is the beginning of peace. When the illusion of constant progress loses its charm, the mind begins to rest. This rest is the first whisper of awakening.[13]

In recent years, even the ancient practice of mindfulness (*sati*) has been absorbed into the machinery of self-optimization. It is marketed as a tool to enhance focus and productivity—a way to recharge so that one can continue to work harder – keep spinning – keep producing. But the Buddha's *sati* was never meant to make one efficient; it was meant to make one free. True mindfulness does not calm the mind so that it can perform better—it reveals the futility of performance itself. It is awareness stripped of agenda. When the observer stops trying to manipulate what is observed, the mind becomes luminous on its own.[14]

From this understanding arises a deeper rest—the rest of comprehension rather than collapse. Nibbāna, the state beyond craving, literally means "to be extinguished."[15] It is the going out of a flame, not because it was forced out, but because its fuel is gone. Burnout is the exhaustion that comes from feeding too many fires; awakening is the quiet in which the last fire goes out.

Siddhartha's enlightenment was not an accomplishment but the end of accomplishment. It was not victory over the world, but release from the compulsion to win. In that moment, he saw that peace is not attained by effort; it appears naturally when effort ends.

The Buddha also saw that healing is not possible in isolation. Modern society replaces genuine community with constant connection—networks that promise togetherness but deliver loneliness. In the burnout society, individuals perform for visibility but rarely encounter one another in presence. The Buddha's response was *sangha*: the fellowship of noble friends (*kalyāṇa-mitta*).[16] True community is not built on constant expression, but on mutual understanding. It does not demand performance but invites participation in silence. In this way, friendship itself becomes medicine.

From burnout to awakening is not a leap, but a loosening. It begins the moment one stops trying to become someone and simply abides in awareness. The self that burns out is the self that cannot stop striving; the self that awakens is the self that disappears.

To awaken is not to shine more brightly than others—it is to burn no longer. The world will continue to spin, its engines humming with ambition, its people running toward the next demand – the next click, scroll, like, emoji, or selfie. But within this restless motion, one may sit quietly, neither resisting nor chasing, knowing that the fire only ends when it runs out of fuel. In that stillness, the fever breaks. The mind cools. And what remains is not fatigue, but peace.

The Tools of the Buddha

I do not think it can be repeated frequently enough: Fatigue, in the modern world, has become our common element—the air everyone breathes. Byung-Chul Han calls this the *achievement society*, a world where no one is oppressed but everyone is exhausted.[17] The old tyrant taskmaster has disappeared, and in its place stands the smiling self, endlessly commanding itself to perform, produce, and *become*. The exploiters and the exploited are one and the same. It is a civilization that mistakes freedom for acceleration and self-realization for self-consumption.

The Buddha would recognize this world instantly. He, too, lived amid an achievement culture—though of another sort. Fifth-century BCE India was a *no-society* of ritual and hierarchy, where meaning came through obedience to form. One was born into station and duty. The Buddha's journey, from palace life to awakening beneath the Pipal tree (Bodhi tree), was a revolt against that system of inherited certainty. He walked out of the *no-society* into a wilderness of questions, where he discovered a deeper rhythm of becoming and unbecoming. What Han calls *burnout*, the Buddha diagnosed long ago as *dukkha*: the stress inherent in craving, the friction of always becoming something else.

The Age of Exhaustion

Han's *burnout subject* is a creature of endless permission. No longer commanded, it is the "self" that commands. Every *yes* to possibility multiplies its hidden *no*. The modern person collapses beneath the weight of self-invention, believing this exhaustion to be freedom. The Buddha's diagnosis runs along the same fault line. At the core of every act of striving he found *taṇhā*—craving. From craving comes *upādāna*—grasping, clinging—and from clinging comes *bhava*—becoming.[18] Becoming, in the Buddha's sense, is the engine of fatigue: the ceaseless project of constructing a "me"

against the grain of impermanence. Han exposes the symptom; the Buddha exposes the mechanism.

Communion with the Other

Han mourns the disappearance of the Other in the transparent, self-referential society. The self now performs to itself, seeking confirmation instead of encounter. The Buddha's entire path is the opposite gesture: the restoration of communion with what is not self. When he turned his attention from palace luxury to the sight of sickness, aging, and death, he entered dialogue with the Other—the world as it is, not as he wanted it to be.

In the Buddha's language this is *yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*: "knowing and seeing things as they have come to be."[19] The "Other" is not a person or deity but the immediacy of experience—sights, sounds, sensations, thoughts—met without ownership. Meditation (*bhavana*), rightly understood, is this act of meeting – of meeting the "Other." It is not retreat from the world but re-encounter with it by exposing our minds to the vastness that is outside of our own minds.

The Misuse of Meditation

Here the modern age has turned even the Buddha's remedy into a stimulant. Mindfulness apps promise focus, calm, productivity. Meditation has been refashioned as a wellness supplement for the same restless ego it was designed to deconstruct. The question has shifted from "What is this mind?" to "What can this practice do for me?" In Han's vocabulary, meditation has become another commodity of the positivity society—one more mirror reflecting the self's own reflection.

Yet the Pāli word translated as meditation—*bhāvanā*—does not mean passive contemplation or self-improvement.[20] Its root √*bhū* (the verbal root *bhū*) means "to be" or "to become," but in a causative sense: to bring something wholesome into being, to cultivate.[21] *Bhāvanā* is not the *bhava* (becoming) of dependent

origination, which sustains the cycle of suffering and dissatisfaction. It is the cultivation that undoes that very cycle.

In dependent origination, *bhava* (becoming) arises from clinging and produces birth, aging, and death. In practice, *bhāvanā* is the cultivation of the mental conditions—ethics, mindfulness, wisdom—that bring about *bhava-nirodha*, the cessation of that becoming. The paradox resolves itself: true "becoming" in meditation is the gradual becoming of a mind that no longer needs to become.[22]

What the "Yes-Society" Meditator Is Becoming

So, what is the *yes-society* meditator becoming? Generally, a calmer, more efficient self: the same project wrapped in soft lighting, sitting on a two-hundred-dollar cushion. It is still the self's mirror, still driven by the hidden wish to fix, to optimize, to feel good. The Buddha's *bhāvanā* faces outward. It cultivates qualities that allow the selfing process to relax its grip. The practitioner is not creating a new identity but cultivating the conditions under which identity can dissolve.

When the Buddha sat beneath the Bodhi tree, he was not manifesting a product but exhausting a process. His meditation was not accumulation but relinquishment—until there was no clinger left to cling.

Countermeasures to Burnout

1. **Right View** — Seeing the Engine[23]

Burnout begins with ignorance of cause. The Buddha's *Right View* names the pattern: all of the body's sense contacts gives rise to feeling, feeling to craving, craving to clinging, clinging to becoming – the desire and craving to become something - someone. To see this chain is to see how suffering manufactures itself. Once known, it can be dismantled.

2. **Right Intention** — Re-aiming Desire[24]

Where Han's subject aims for endless self-expansion, *Right Intention* (*sammā-saṅkappa*) redirects the mind toward abandonment, goodwill, and harmlessness. These intentions don't suppress vitality; they free it from the compulsion to assert "I" -to the craving to define identity.

3. **Sīla** — Ethical Steadiness[25]

In the *achievement society*, ethics are optional, negotiated. The Buddha's principles function differently: they are energy conservation. To refrain from harm, deceit, and indulgence is to seal the leaks through which vitality drains. The ethical life is the nervous system's rest.

4. **Sense-Door Training** — Meeting the Other

Guarding the sense doors (*indriya-saṃvara*) isn't ascetic withdrawal but the cultivation of direct contact with the "Other": seeing just the seen, hearing just the heard. The *Bāhiya* instruction recorded in the Pali texts (Udāna 1.10)[26] encapsulates the Buddha's most radical insight—experience without appropriation. That is the pure communion Han's *achievement society* world has forgotten.

5. **Satipaṭṭhāna** — From Mirror to Field[27]

Mindfulness (*sati*) of body, feeling, mind, and phenomena (Pali text: Majjhima Nikāya 10) shifts awareness from narrative to field. Each observation—breath, tone, thought—is a point of encounter, not introspection. The self is displaced by process – the attachment to "me" begins to dissolve.

6. **Right Effort** — Effort Without Strain[28]

Han's world equates effort with aggression. The Buddha's *Right Effort* (Pali text: Saṃyutta Nikāya 45) works by cultivation rather than coercion: prevent the unwholesome, abandon what has arisen, arouse the wholesome, sustain it. It is gentle governance of energy, sustainable because it is non-egoic – not all about "me".

7. **Samādhi** — The End of Signal Noise

Concentration (*samādhi*) isn't escape but coherence. In *jhāna* the mind ceases scattering itself across multiple demands. Jhāna, is a deep meditative absorption—a state in which the mind becomes unified, steady, and free from the turbulence of sensory desire and distraction.[29] Jhāna is the still water of the mind when all winds of craving and aversion have ceased. It is not the goal of the path but a vital means by which the mind is steadied for insight (*vipassanā*), allowing wisdom to see reality as it truly is—impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self. The *achievement society* fragments attention; *samādhi* gathers it into a single, silent flame.

8. **Paññā** — Insight as Structural Correction[30]

Insight produces wisdom (*paññā*), which sees that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self – not "me". This isn't metaphysics; it is perception purified of an attachment to ownership. When things are seen as transient processes, the compulsion to grasp them evaporates. What Han describes as *neuronal fatigue* is simply the by-product of misunderstanding impermanence.

9. **Brahmavihāra** — Compassion as De-centering[31]

Loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity (Pali texts: Saṃyutta Nikāya 1.8, Aṅguttara Nikāya 4.125) relocate

value from the self to the field of other people, and other beings. Compassion is not moral sentiment but the architecture of a mind no longer organized around "me." It restores the social fabric Han calls lost—the genuine encounter that no algorithm can mediate.

The Reclamation of the Negative

Han's *positivity society* fears the negative. Pain, failure, loss of comfort, rest—all must be rebranded as wellness. The Buddha reclaims the negative as teacher. Dukkha (dissatisfaction and suffering) is not an error; it is data. To understand it is to unlock the way out. The *Four Noble Truths* function as a diagnostic algorithm:

- Recognize the symptom (the dissatisfaction, the suffering).
- Trace the cause (desire, craving).
- Realize cessation (*nirodha* cessation, extinction, stopping).
- Apply the path (*magga*- method, path or way).

This is not doctrine but therapy. The Buddha does not offer slogans of positivity; he offers instructions for ending suffering altogether.[32]

The Logic of Cessation

Through *bhāvanā* (meditation), the mind cultivates conditions that lead to unbinding – unchaining, releasing. As dispassion (coolness) arises, clinging fades; with the fading of clinging, the craving for becoming ceases; with the ceasing of becoming, the cycle of the birth and death of craving no longer recur. This cessation (*nirodha*) is not annihilation but the cooling of the fire. In the Buddha's words, "*When the fires of craving, aversion, and delusion go out, what remains is peace.*"[33]

This is the final answer to burnout. Where Han ends in melancholy—the awareness of exhaustion without exit—the Buddha ends in silence, the still mind beyond ownership. The cessation of becoming is not collapse; it is completion.

The Buddha as Exemplar of "No-Society" Awakening

The Buddha's biography embodies the movement from form to freedom. Born into ritual order, he turned toward direct experience. His communion with the Other—age, sickness, death, solitude—became the crucible of insight.[34] In leaving the way of life he had known under his father's care; he was not rejecting society but refusing substitution: the false comfort of inherited meaning. His awakening was the discovery that reality requires no performance, only understanding.

Siddhartha Gautama was, in Han's language, a creature of the no-society—a world still shaped by restraint, silence, and limitation. The society into which he was born did not yet worship transparency or constant affirmation. Boundaries, prohibitions, and rituals defined the moral landscape, and within those structures lay an encounter with what Han calls the negative—the presence of "no" that gives depth and resistance to existence. In such a world, desire met its own shadow and was forced to reflect. It was precisely this friction—the awareness of lack—that gave rise to Siddhartha's great question. His awakening was not born of endless affirmation but of confrontation with finitude, with the unavoidable experience of dukkha. In that confrontation, limitation became revelation. The no-society did not stifle him; it gave him the silence in which the truth could be heard.

From Achievement to Stillness

A person who is a creature of the *achievement society* says: "I must become." "The "me" that I think I am must become what I think I should be." "I must protect my identity with complete transparency." "I must become like glass for all to see." But, the Buddha replies: Let such becoming cease.

Han's world offers optimization; the Buddha offers relinquishment. One promises endless growth; the other promises the end of the need to grow. In that difference lies the cure for burnout.

To practice the Buddha's path is not to escape the world but to re-enter it unburdened—capable of real encounter, real work, and real rest. When mindfulness matures into understanding, the self's circuitry cools. Fatigue gives way to stillness; striving gives way to presence.

Coda: The Silence After the Noise

The modern mind, like Han's achievement subject, fears this silence because it cannot brand it – expose it in the brightness of transparency.[35] Yet this silence is the Buddha's final word—not the absence of life, but the full presence of life without grasping.

When the mind no longer seeks to own experience, it becomes intimate with everything. The Other is no longer foreign; it is the world revealing itself, endlessly arising and passing away. Burnout ends where communion begins.

The Buddha's response to the Burnout Society, then, is not a critique but an invitation—to see, to release, and to awaken.

The Day the Lights Went Out: Imagination Experiment

It began without spectacle. No lightning split the sky; no aurora announced the event—just a sudden dimming of the world's pulse. The hum of servers, the whisper of routers, the invisible vibration of data—all stopped at once. Screens flickered and died. Across continents, everything connected went still.

At first, disbelief. Fingers tapped on glass, harder, faster. Eyes darted between black mirrors, searching for the familiar glow. "Does your phone work?" "Is your tablet still on?" The questions spread like sparks across a darkened plain. When no one could answer, panic began to rise. For the first time in a century, the signal was

gone—and with it, the heartbeat of a species that had forgotten how to live without electricity.

They searched for blame. Someone must have caused this. Governments, hackers, the sun, God—each theory born from fear. The transparent society had lost its transparency, and with it, the illusion of control. Neighbors turned toward one another, not in solidarity but accusation. "You still have power, don't you?" "What did you do?" The first violence was not born of hunger, but of uncertainty. Without data, the mind demanded a culprit.

Han once wrote that the achievement subject is the exploiter and the exploited, a self-consuming engine of performance. Now that engine had seized. The oracles of the age—the networks, the servers, the devices that mediated every thought—had fallen silent. Their dependency, once hidden beneath the illusion of autonomy, now exposed itself in raw desperation. The people waited for the hum to return, certain that this was temporary. It must be. The backups would restore, the grids would reset, the oracle would awaken.

But it did not.

Hours passed. The belief that the system would self-correct began to crumble. Quiet deepened into something unbearable. Without messages, updates, or metrics, time lost its shape. The mind, deprived of distraction, turned inward and found only noise—its own.

Night arrived, vast and absolute. Cities once ablaze with light became silhouettes. The stars, hidden for generations, returned like ghosts. Some wept at the sight; others screamed. The constellations seemed alien—too distant, too indifferent.

By the second day, disbelief gave way to chaos. The *achievement society*, unable to measure itself, began to unravel. Offices emptied. Screens were smashed in rage. Markets dissolved because no one could calculate. The self, deprived of its algorithmic mirror, no longer knew if it existed. People had always relied on data to

confirm their being: the notification, the comment, the echo of themselves refracted through the network. Now, confronted with silence, they were forced to face what Han called the horror of opacity—the return of the unknowable Other.

Some clung to ritualized routines, performing productivity without purpose: making lists, organizing shelves, talking into dead microphones. Others wandered streets, speaking aloud to no one, hoping to hear an automated voice answer back.

But amid the panic, something else began. On the third night, when exhaustion softened the frenzy, small groups gathered. A handful of strangers sat together beneath the indifferent stars, drawn by the primal gravity of company. Words came awkwardly, haltingly. Laughter sounded strange without recording devices. Someone told a story. Another replied not with analysis, but with silence that listened.

In the absence of light, the face of the Other reappeared. For the first time in generations, people looked directly at one another, not through screens but through presence. What began as fear became recognition. The body remembered what it was to exist without witness, without data, without the need to perform.

Weeks passed. Those who could not bear the stillness fell into despair or madness; those who could began to adapt. Fire returned to the cities—not the neon of consumption, but the flicker of candles, the breath of shared flame. Children, unbothered by nostalgia, played with shadows. Elders rediscovered the rhythm of sleep. The nights grew long and full of sound: laughter, weeping, song.

In that vast experiment of forced silence, the world encountered itself anew. Humanity, unplugged, became once again a listening species. The *achievement society*, having burned itself out, discovered in failure what it had been chasing all along—a life not mediated – not transparent, but lived.

Somewhere, in a room lit by the steady glow of firelight, a young woman writes a poem in a paper notebook with an old pencil. There is no post to share, no audience to measure, no emoji to express. Her words exist only for the moment, and that is enough.

She pauses, hears her breath, and smiles without knowing why. The silence outside hums—not with data, but with life. Perhaps this is how awakening begins: not in progress, but in the stillness that follows its end.

The lights went out,
and the noise fell with them.
For the first time,
I could hear my own breathing
and the wind moving
through the ribs of the world.

No one is watching.
No one is waiting to respond.
The sky is older than memory,
and I am smaller than a spark,
yet here, in the hush,
I am whole.

The fire speaks without words.
The stars do not explain themselves.
And I understand—
at last—
that nothing needs to shine or glow
to be real.

Chapter 11 – Naming the Nameless

The Modern Construction of "Buddhism"

When the Buddha wandered the plains of the Ganges basin, no one asked him what religion he belonged to. The question would have made as little sense as asking a physician which sect he represented when prescribing a remedy. He spoke of Dhamma—"*that which holds things together*," the order of reality that requires no belief to sustain it. For him, Dhamma was not a creed but the texture of experience itself, the arising and fading that could be seen by anyone willing to look closely enough.

If he were to hear the word "Buddhism," he might pause—not out of offense, but because the word turns what is fluid into something fixed. He taught a path, not a possession. He described causes and conditions, not an identity. When asked who followed his teachings, he referred simply to those who trained their minds: bhikkhus, bhikkhunīs, upāsakas, upāsikās. These were practitioners, not adherents, but definitely not "Buddhists."

Modern language does something different. It hardens the Dhamma into an -ism. The moment the suffix is added, the mind conjures a bounded thing—an institution, a tradition, a recognizable shape that promises belonging. The word becomes a marker, something we can wear, display, defend. The danger is not the word itself, but the psychological habits it awakens. What was once a path becomes a title. What was a training becomes an identity. What was meant to free the mind becomes another conceptual edifice inside it.

Here, the Buddha's own insights intersect with Byung-Chul Han's critique of the *transparency* and *burnout societies*.[1] Han argues that modern labeling flattens complexity into instant recognizability. A label seems to reveal, yet actually conceals; it creates the illusion of clarity while hiding the living depth beneath it. The "transparent" term obscures more than it reveals. In this sense, "Buddhism" has become one of the opaquest transparent labels of all. It offers the comfort of a name while quietly substituting the name for the thing it points to.

The Dhamma cannot be held by a name—not without shrinking to fit the container. The task is not to reject the word "Buddhism," but to see through it, to recognize it as a convenient designation rather than a thing to possess. What the Buddha offered was not a religion but a method for loosening the mind's grip on all constructions—including the ones meant to honor him. The moment we remember that, the label becomes light again, a simple pointer toward a path walked step by step, breath by breath, in the intimate territory of one's own experience.

The Modern Construction of "Buddhism"

The Buddha did not teach "Buddhism." This point must be established plainly. Neither the word nor the concept exists in the records of the early Pali texts.[2] The Buddha offered Dhamma—a teaching about human experience and suffering—not a religion in the sense familiar to modern people. His followers were simply those who practiced.

The invention of "Buddhism" occurred centuries later. Its current meaning was solidified in the nineteenth century, when European scholars, missionaries, and colonial administrators needed a systematic way to classify the religions of Asia.[3] They coined the term "Buddhism" because they required an equivalent to "Christianity." It was an intellectual convenience, not a reflection of historical reality.

The invention of the label "Buddhism" had consequences far beyond mere convenience. Like the names later attached to the Abrahamic religions, it transformed a complex historical and intellectual tradition into a single, bounded entity. Once named, it became comparable: one "religion" among others, with presumed doctrines, authorities, and boundaries and other-worldly, celestial deities. The label imposed a conceptual framework that the Buddha neither articulated nor intended. It encouraged people to look for the features they associate with religions—creeds, metaphysics,

hierarchies, deities and identities—even though the early teaching contains none of these in the form later assumed.

In effect, naming the tradition created the very abstraction that would come to define it. And, as Han's analysis helps us see, the modern mind readily accepts such abstractions because they provide the transparency it craves: neat categories that seem immediately comprehensible, even as they obscure the underlying reality.

To understand how this label departed from the Buddha's intent, we must recall the intellectual world in which he taught. In Vedic India, knowledge was tied to ritual authority.[4] Religious truth was mediated by the Brāhmaṇas. The Vedas were scripture revealed by the gods. Identity—Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya—was fixed, inherited, and sacralized. The Buddha rejected all of this. He denied the authority of the Vedas. He dismissed caste as spiritually irrelevant. He taught that liberation comes from understanding, not ritual. He insisted that ideas must be tested against experience, not inherited from the past or as favor of acceptance from gods.

"Buddhism," as a label, therefore contradicts the spirit of the Buddha's teachings. He did not propose a fixed identity or doctrine. He proposed a method of inquiry. The modern label creates the very conceptual solidity he sought to dismantle.

But this conceptual shift did not occur in a vacuum. It was shaped by the intellectual and psychological climate of modernity—what Byung-Chul Han describes with unsettling accuracy.[5]

What one identifies as "Buddhist" in this Age would hardly have been recognizable to the Buddha himself—or to those first ragged wanderers who called themselves his companions. Indeed, even the label Buddhist would have baffled him. The very idea of "Buddhism" or a "Buddhist" is the creation of form.

If the Buddha were to hear the word "Buddhism," he might listen with the same kindness he offered to all beings, but he would not recognize the label. He spoke only of Dhamma—the law of nature, the truth seen through direct knowing – the truth of things as they actually are. His early followers were not "Buddhists"; they were simply those who walked the path. The naming of the tradition

came centuries later, shaped largely by colonial taxonomies and the modern desire to categorize the world into discrete, consumable units, which clearly and cogently aligns with Han's philosophy.

Naming, Fabrication, and the Modern Self

In the early discourses, recorded in the Pali texts, naming (nāma) is foundational to how the mind constructs the world.[6] It is part of *nāma-rūpa*: the pairing of naming and forming that produces the experience of discrete objects. Once something is named, we assume it to be an entity. The Buddha understood that this is a cognitive error. It freezes process into substance.

Modern society amplifies this error. Han describes the "achievement subject"—the modern individual who must construct, refine, and display the self.[7] Identity becomes a perpetual project. Labels become central to this process. They offer symbolic capital. They shape how one is perceived.

Thus "Buddhist" becomes, for many, an identity to inhabit. The phrase "I am a Buddhist" functions not as a simple statement of practice, but as an expression of who one imagines oneself to be. The label becomes part of the self's performance.

This is exactly the opposite of what the Buddha taught. He argued that identity is the root of clinging. In the Vedic worldview, identity was inherited through birth; in the modern worldview, it is produced through concepts and achievement. But the Buddha saw both as delusions. To identify oneself with a label, whether ancient or modern, is to mistake convention for reality.

Han reaches a similar conclusion, though from a very different starting point. He argues that identity-construction is the pathology of modern society. The modern self is overburdened by the need to define itself. It clings to labels for stability. What the Buddha saw as the mechanism of suffering, Han sees as the source of modern exhaustion.

Thus, the term "Buddhism" becomes psychologically potent precisely because it offers the achievement subject a stable identity—a function the Buddha would have regarded as spiritually dangerous.

So, naming carries consequences. In the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 18), the Buddha explains how the world is constructed at the moment perception congeals into naming—saññā hardening into papañca—giving rise to conflict, selfing, and proliferation[8]. Naming appears transparent: "This is Buddhism. I am a Buddhist." But the transparency is deceptive. The moment a name is spoken, the mind fashions a form (*nāma-rūpa*), and with form comes clinging. Modern people cling to the name "Buddhism" as a form of "being" something - someone.

When a Label Becomes a Commodity

In today's world, "Buddhism" is more than an identity. It has become a commodity. Modern culture—what Han calls the "burnout society"—turns inner life into a site of productivity.[9] Everything becomes a means to self-optimization. Mindfulness is used to increase efficiency. Meditation is used to reduce stress. Compassion becomes emotional labor.

The Buddha did not teach any of this. His method concerned the end of suffering, not the improvement of the self. Yet the modern self uses the Dhamma as fuel for the very processes the Buddha sought to extinguish.

This distortion occurs because, as Han presents, the *burnout society* internalizes external authority. In Vedic religion, priests and rituals structured the path. In the Buddha's time, he replaced this with personal inquiry and ethical discipline. But in our age, external authority has been absorbed entirely. One polices oneself. One becomes one's own priest, judge, and overseer.

Han's point is simple: modern individuals exploit themselves. They treat their minds as sites of continuous labor. Spirituality becomes another task, another project, another achievement.

Thus “Buddhism” becomes a product. It signifies calmness, mindfulness, authenticity—qualities that can be curated and displayed. One does not merely practice the Dhamma; one markets the image of a person who practices it. This phenomenon would have struck the Buddha as paradoxical. The path is not a performance, and is definitely not a thing to possess. It is a discipline that undermines the very tendency toward self-performance.

Transparency and the Disappearance of Depth

Here we arrive at the heart of Han’s critique: the *transparency society*. Han argues that modern culture prizes visibility. What matters is what can be seen, shared, and immediately understood. Transparency promises clarity but produces superficiality. It eliminates depth in favor of surface.[10]

The modern concept of “Buddhism” fits perfectly into this framework. It is succinct, recognizable, and emotionally appealing. It promises immediate understanding. But it is profoundly misleading.

The Buddha’s teaching is not transparent. It is subtle. It requires careful analysis. It requires, as Gombrich often emphasizes, attention to context, language, and the Buddha’s method of argument.[11] It requires understanding how the Buddha repurposed Vedic ideas—karma (kamma), rebirth, sacrifice—and turned them inward. It requires seeing how the Buddha constructed meaning through metaphor, not metaphysics.

None of this is visible on the surface. Therefore, transparency culture ignores it. Instead, it prefers simplified narratives: mindfulness for stress relief, compassion for well-being, enlightenment for peace. These are not wrong as aspirations, but they do not reflect the Buddha’s intent. They reflect modern needs.

Han explains why. Transparency society eliminates the unfamiliar. It turns everything into consumable experience. It erases resistance.[12] The Dhamma is resistant; it challenges deeply held assumptions. Therefore, it is sidelined.

The result is what Han calls "the elimination of the Other."[13] The early Buddhist path is full of "otherness"—ideas that resist immediate comprehension. Modern Buddhism erases this. It makes the Dhamma familiar. It domesticates it. It aphorizes his teachings into snippets that are largely out of context. It removes its capacity to confront. This is why the Buddha's message is increasingly lost.

Han's philosophy illuminates this process from another angle. In the transparency society, what appears clear and self-evident often conceals more than it reveals. A transparent concept like "Buddhism" seems simple, obvious, obvious enough to wear like an identity badge. Yet its very simplicity is the mask covering a deep opacity: centuries of cultural accretion, psychological projection, selective reconstruction, and institutional invention. The label creates the illusion of understanding while hiding the vastness it compresses. This is precisely Han's identifying concept of the *Transparent Society* (the positive-society).

The same concealment occurs when modern persons call themselves "Buddhists." Identity in the achievement society is a project, something manufactured and displayed. The name becomes an instrument of self-production: authentic, spiritual, mindful—qualities curated and performed. What was once a path of seeing becomes an item in the portfolio of the self. The transparency of the identity— "I am a Buddhist"—hides its function: self-manufacture, self-display, self-affirmation. Han would call this the opacity of the transparent self.

This is precisely what the Buddha warned against in the Alagaddūpama Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 22), where he likens his teaching to a raft to be used and then abandoned[14]. The raft is a means, not an identity. To cling to the Dhamma itself—let alone a name invented long after his passing—would be to confuse the tool with deliverance. The Buddha's path deconstructs self-view; naming constructs it.

Even more pointedly, in the Anattalakkhana Sutta (Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.59), he declares of each aggregate—form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness— "*This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my 'self.'*"[15] If none of these may be called "I," how could the word "Buddhist" become an identity without violating the very insight the Buddha proclaimed?

This is where modernity complicates the picture. Over the last century, global religion has declined steadily, not because people lost interest in meaning, but because the authority once external—churches, priests, divine command—has been internalized. Han calls this the passage from the prohibition society (no-society/negative-society) to the achievement society (yes-society/positive-society), where domination is no longer enforced from above but produced from within.[16] The individual becomes both master and servant, priest and worshipper, offering devotion to the self it endlessly manufactures.

The decline of religion and the rise of the achievement-subject are two sides of the same process. External authority becomes unnecessary once its functions—validation, purification, confession—are absorbed into the psyche. The modern subject does not abandon religion; it internalizes it. What was once sought through divine gaze is now sought through visibility, transparency, and self-display.

Here, Payne's analysis (*Secularizing Buddhism*) of secularizing discourse becomes revealing.[17] He shows how modern culture reshapes Buddhist practice into a system of inner management: mindfulness as optimization, meditation as performance tuning, awareness as productivity. But there is a deeper irony: Payne's entire subject—the secularization of Buddhism—exists only because the achievement-subject exists. Without the self that needs to display itself, refine itself, and brand itself, the very notion of "Buddhism" as a modern identity would lose its psychological traction. The discourse Payne analyzes is a symptom of the same inward colonization that Han diagnoses. The modern "self" studies itself in a hall of mirrors and calls the reflection "Buddhism."

This is why the naming of the tradition hides more than it reveals. The concept "Buddhism" appears transparent, clean, and easily understood, but it is in fact opaque—an obscuring form, a conceptual veneer covering a vast and fluid reality. Han teaches that the demand for transparency erases depth, otherness, and mystery; the name "Buddhism" has likewise flattened a complex web of teachings, practices, and insights into a manageable identity-form.

The Buddha anticipated this danger. In the Kālāma Sutta (Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.65), he rejects adherence to tradition, scripture, or authority, insisting that truth be tested directly, not inherited or believed on the basis of identity.[18] And in the Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 72), he refuses metaphysical questions about the Tathāgata's post-mortem existence because the categories themselves distort what they attempt to describe.[19]

To label the path "Buddhism," then, is to do precisely what he discouraged: to turn a living process into a conceptual possession, to freeze the fluid into the fixed, to convert insight into identity. The modern mind, conditioned to categorize and curate, takes the Dhamma and makes it a profile.

The Buddha's perspective is the opposite. As the Itivuttaka Sutta (Itivuttaka Sutta 90)[20] puts it:

"*This Dhamma is visible here and now, timeless, inviting inspection, leading onward, to be realized by the wise, each for themselves.*"

- Not named.
- Not owned.
- Not performed.
- Only seen.

What modernity presents as self-realization is, in the Buddha's analysis, simply another round of becoming—bhava-taṇhā, the craving to be something. The name "Buddhist" feels transparent, but functions as another form of opacity: another story the mind tells to give solidity to what is ultimately empty. The path does not

ask us to become anything. It asks us to understand. And understanding begins where naming ends.

The Label That Became a Thing

If the Buddha were to observe the way the words "Buddhism" and "Buddhist" circulate today, he would surely recognize them as useful conventions.[21] Words, after all, are not the problem. He used language as skillfully as a physician uses instruments—not because words are true in themselves, but because they can point toward what must be seen. Yet what has unfolded over the last century is not merely the use of labels, but their elevation into objects of psychological value.

The term "Buddhism," born in the nineteenth century as part of the West's desire to classify the world's religions, has evolved from a descriptive convenience into a conceptual possession.[22] The "ism" at its end completes the transformation. It converts a path of practice into a distinct conceptual package, a thing with boundaries and implied content. From the perspective of *nāma-rūpa*, this is exactly the moment when naming hardens into form—the mind not only names the path, but gives it shape, substance, and the illusion of independent existence. The path becomes a thing in the world, something one can adopt, acquire, display, or defend.

Han's philosophy uncovers the deeper danger in this shift. In the transparency society, what appears self-evident—simple, open, honest—is often the most concealed.[23] "Buddhism" appears like the clearest of labels. Everyone thinks they know what it means. But its transparency is a façade. The label hides far more than it reveals: the diversity of early Buddhist communities, the Buddha's refusal to found a religion, the Dhamma's rejection of identity, and the radical simplicity of liberation. Its clarity is its greatest opacity.

Naming transforms the living Dhamma into a visible object, and visibility is the currency of the achievement society.[24] The modern self, conditioned by the imperative to produce and perform itself, treats identities as achievements—something to be earned, refined,

or worn. Thus, the label "Buddhist" becomes a credential, a badge, a personal brand. It signals not only spiritual affiliation, but spiritual adequacy. One does not merely practice the path; one is something because of it.

This is precisely how the *transparent society* operates: by converting inner life into self-display.[25] "Buddhism," in this environment, becomes a psychological asset. And psychological assets quickly become achievements.

Han writes that the *achievement-subject* is driven by the endless task of self-optimization: the self is both project and product, laborer and commodity.[26] Within this framework, "Buddhism" becomes a thing one can "get better at," a thing one can "own," a thing that contributes to the self's value. It becomes a point of comparison, a mark of spiritual performance. A person may not say, "I am holier than thou," but they will think, "I am more mindful than you." In the logic of the *achievement society*, spiritual attainment becomes indistinguishable from secular success.

This is why the modern label is so deeply opaque. It collapses the distinction between walking the path and being seen to walk the path. It transforms the Dhamma's self-abandonment into the self's newest improvement strategy. It swaps liberation for visibility.[27]

Han's analysis of the *burnout society* also falls directly into place. The relentless task of self-production— "be mindful," "be spiritual," "be present"—eventually buckles under its own weight. Even meditation becomes labor. Even awareness becomes something to measure. Even awakening becomes a goal to pursue with the same anxious intensity one applies to career or health. The modern person tries to "achieve" Buddhism with the same desperation they try to achieve everything else. The result is exhaustion draped in spiritual language.[28]

The Buddha warned of this long before modernity. In the Alagaddūpama Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 22), he cautions against clinging even to the Dhamma, comparing it to a raft used to cross the flood—helpful only until one has reached the farther shore. Yet today the raft is not only clung to; it is polished, repainted,

brandished, and displayed. It becomes part of the self's psychological furniture. The raft is no longer a tool; it is a trophy.[29]

The irony is complete: a teaching designed to loosen identification is used to strengthen it. A path meant to liberate from becoming becomes a new arena for becoming. The "Buddhist" identity becomes another shadow within the process of *bhava-taṇhā*—the craving to be something.[30]

Han's conceptual work reveals why this distortion occurred. Transparency demands visible identity. The *achievement society* demands personal branding. *Burnout society* demands constant self-improvement.[31] When these forces converge, "Buddhism" becomes not a practice, but a performance. Not a path to walk, but an identity to display. Its transparency—the feeling that the name is clear—is the very mechanism that obscures the truth of the path.

The Buddha would not object to the name. But he would notice what the mind does with it. He would see how easily a label becomes a thing, how quickly a thing becomes a self, and how naturally a self begins to defend what it believes it possesses. He would see how naming gives rise to form, and how form gives rise to clinging, and how clinging gives rise to suffering.[32]

In the *Transparency Society*, "Buddhism" is both the clearest label and the most concealed. In the *Burnout Society*, it is both a spiritual ideal and a psychological burden. In the *achievement society*, it is both a path and a project.[33]

But in the Dhamma, it is none of these. In the Dhamma, it is only a direction— a finger pointing at the moon – not the moon itself – not a trophy raft. Not a thing. Not an identity. Not an achievement. Not something to be owned. Only something to be seen.[34]

Why Mahāyāna Conquered the Modern Imagination

Mahāyāna traditions dominate global perceptions of Buddhism for reasons that Han's concepts clarify.[35] Mahāyāna offers rich symbolism, cosmic narratives, heroic bodhisattvas, and elaborate metaphysics. These features lend themselves to visibility. They are

aesthetically striking and emotionally compelling. They satisfy modern expectations of what a "religion" should look like.

Early practice of the Dhamma does not. Its analysis of suffering is rigorous, even austere. It demands personal responsibility and direct observation. It offers no supernatural shortcuts. It rejects speculation on metaphysical matters. It emphasizes ethics, effort, and insight.[36] These features resist both commodification and transparency.

Mahāyāna's dramatic narratives and striking iconography, by contrast, fit the *transparency society* perfectly.[37] They can be displayed, shared, and consumed. They offer accessible emotional meaning. They satisfy the achievement subject's desire for roles, identities, and grand narratives.

This does not mean Mahāyāna is "wrong" or "bad." It means that modernity prefers it because it aligns with modern values. Han's analysis makes this preference intelligible.[38] The tragedy is not Mahāyāna. The tragedy is that modernity mistakes visibility for truth. The result is that the most visible forms of Buddhism become the most influential—regardless of how far they depart from the Buddha's original teaching.

The Distance from the Dhamma

What emerges from all this is a significant gap between the modern concept of Buddhism and the Dhamma the Buddha taught. This gap is not the result of malice or ignorance. It is the result of cultural forces.[39] The achievement society seeks identities. The burnout society seeks tools. The transparency society seeks visibility. The Dhamma offers none of these—not as modernity conceives of them.

The Buddha offered a method for understanding experience, not a doctrine to believe. He offered a way of seeing, not a symbol to display. He aimed to dismantle identity, not reinforce it.[40]

Yet modernity reinvents his teaching according to its own needs. It turns the Dhamma into a product, the path into an identity, and liberation into a lifestyle.

Han helps us understand why. The cultural conditions of modern life encourage precisely the tendencies the Buddha sought to eliminate—clinging to names, constructing identities, mistaking symbols for truths.[41] The modern concept of "Buddhism" thus obscures the Dhamma more than it reveals it.

A Teaching That Resists Capture

The Buddha's teaching cannot be owned, displayed, or used as an identity without losing its essence. It is not a transparent teaching. It is a subtle discipline concerned with the processes by which the mind constructs experience. It cannot be commodified because it undermines the self that seeks to commodify it. It cannot be performed because it requires the dismantling of the performer.

When we say "Buddhism," we risk turning this discipline into something static—an object, a heritage, a spiritual brand. But the Dhamma the Buddha taught is closer to a way of seeing than to a thing one can possess. In this sense, his teaching is inherently nameless: the reality it points to is not altered by what we call it.

Han's critique of modernity therefore complements the Buddha's critique of reification and identity. Both point to the same conclusion: the mind must see through the illusions it creates. The label is one such illusion. It reassures us that we "belong," that we "are" something. Yet the Buddha's path cuts in the opposite direction. It loosens the grip of every "I am," every "this is mine," every "this is what I am."

To name the nameless is unavoidable—we must speak. But to believe that the name is the thing is the beginning of delusion. The Dhamma points beyond itself, stripping away the very identities we try so desperately to stabilize. The work is not to polish the label but to understand the processes of mind that cling to it.

Modernity has created something called "Buddhism." The Buddha taught something called "Dhamma." To conflate the two is to replace method with myth, understanding with identity, depth with transparency.

The task for the modern practitioner is not to acquire Buddhism but to relinquish the need for such acquisition. The path begins not with naming but with seeing. Not with identity but with inquiry. Not with transparency but with depth. Only then does the Dhamma emerge from behind the conceptual screen that modernity has placed before it.

A Way Forward for the Modern Practitioner

It would be a mistake to conclude from this discussion that modern practitioners must abandon the traditions in which they have been raised or to which they feel devotion. Religious traditions evolve. Their symbols, rituals, and narratives serve social and psychological functions that the Buddha himself understood well. Mahāyāna traditions, in particular, have sustained communities for centuries and have produced remarkable ethical insight, artistic achievement, and philosophical depth.[42]

The issue is not the existence of these traditions. It is the misunderstanding that arises when their later developments are taken to represent the Buddha's own teaching.[43] As I have argued throughout this chapter, the modern concept of "Buddhism" has been shaped far more by cultural expectations—colonial classification, romantic orientalism, and now the demands of the transparency and achievement society—than by the early texts. A thoughtful practitioner need not reject their tradition to acknowledge this. What is needed is not sectarian separation but conceptual clarity. One can continue to participate in Mahāyāna rituals, appreciate its literature, and value its devotional forms, while at the same time distinguishing between: what the Buddha actually taught; what later communities added, and what modern culture has projected onto the tradition.

This distinction is not a repudiation of Mahāyāna; it is an invitation to deepen one's understanding. In practical terms, this means giving priority to the early discourses—the Nikāyas and Āgamas—where the Buddha's voice speaks with remarkable consistency.[44] These texts present a teaching that is psychologically

precise and philosophically restrained. They avoid metaphysical speculation and focus relentlessly on suffering, its causes, and its cessation.

A practitioner grounded in these texts will find it easier to separate the Buddha's method from the centuries of cultural elaboration that followed. This approach also helps guard against the distractions of what Han would call the "noise" of the *transparency society*—the proliferation of images, personalities, and symbolic structures that obscure the core of the teaching.[45] The modern world often emphasizes the visible aspects of tradition: charismatic or famous celebrity teachers, elaborate rituals, and the mythic language of cosmic Buddhas. These elements may inspire devotion, but they do not replace the disciplined inquiry that the Buddha insisted upon. The early discourses ask something simpler and more difficult: to look at one's own experience, see its conditions, and understand its arising and ceasing.

A Mahāyāna practitioner who supplements their practice with the early texts does not lose anything of value; they gain the ability to recognize which elements of their tradition illuminate the Buddha's teaching and which elements reflect later concerns—ritual, literature, institutional needs, or cultural imagination.

In this way, one can remain within a Mahāyāna community without being limited by its interpretive frame. The point is not to discard the richness of later traditions, but to allow the Buddha's own teaching to provide the foundation. From this foundation, one can appreciate the diversity of Buddhist history without mistaking that diversity for the origin.

The Buddha's teaching does not demand allegiance to a sect. It demands understanding. And understanding is strengthened, not weakened, by returning to the earliest sources.

A practitioner who takes this path will find that much of the pageantry falls away on its own. What remains is what the Buddha himself taught: a method that does not rely on myth or metaphysics, but on the direct observation of experience.

This is not a rejection of tradition; it is a recovery of purpose. It allows one to participate in whatever form of Buddhism one chooses, while keeping the Dhamma—not the label, not the identity, not the imagery—at the center. And that is the only point on which the Buddha was uncompromising.

Righteous Indignation Without a God

If "Buddhism" has no creator god, no jealous deity, and no divine revelation to defend, what exactly is being guarded when modern so-called Buddhists rise in righteous indignation? Why does the mere suggestion that the label "Buddhism" is a late construction—or that the Buddha did not found a religion—sometimes provoke the same fury one finds in the most doctrinaire defenders of the Abrahamic faiths?

From the Buddha's perspective, the answer is straightforward: what is being defended is self-view. In earlier centuries, religious outrage was framed as loyalty to God, scripture, or church. In the achievement society, the sacred object has quietly shifted. The self has taken the place of the deity.[46] The label "Buddhist" becomes one of its most prized attributes.

Han's analysis makes this invisible transfer easier to see. The subject of the transparency and *achievement society* must continually display itself as authentic, committed, spiritually serious.[47] "Buddhism" becomes a key element of this performance. To be publicly known as a Buddhist—especially a follower of a charismatic, modern, media-savvy teacher—is to inhabit a role that carries symbolic capital: compassionate, mindful, awakened, non-dogmatic. Critique of that role is experienced not as a disagreement about doctrine, but as an attack on the self that depends on it.

This is why so many self-described Buddhists—particularly in Western, post-Christian contexts—defend their "Buddhism" with a fervor indistinguishable from the zeal of those who defend their God.[48] It is not that they have a deity to protect; it is that their carefully curated Buddhist identity functions as a god: unreproachable, beyond question, the guarantor of their goodness.

Any suggestion that "Buddhism" is a historical construct, or that the early texts depict something far leaner, more austere, and more unsettling than the modern brand, threatens this guarantor. Hence the indignation.

The same mechanism explains the disdain some of these practitioners show toward the Theravāda school. Theravāda is often dismissed as "dry," "outdated," or "lacking devotion," not because its teachings are shallow, but because they resist the spectacle that *transparency society* craves.[49] There is little in the early discourses that flatters the self, offers grand cosmic roles, or provides emotionally charged narratives of heroic salvation. The Buddha speaks of aging, illness, death, craving, clinging, and release. He offers not a drama to inhabit but a pattern to understand.

For the achievement subject, this is profoundly unsatisfying. A path that undermines identity is hard to convert into content. By contrast, certain modern Mahāyāna and "celebrity Buddhist" presentations offer rich symbolic material for self-construction: bodhisattva identities to adopt, devotional practices to display, inspirational slogans to circulate, spiritual communities to be seen in. These are easily posted, shared, and performed. They fit seamlessly into the logic of transparency and achievement. It is no wonder that those who are deeply invested in such forms regard Theravāda's insistence on restraint, renunciation, and close attention to dukkha as an embarrassment—too severe, too bare, too resistant to branding.

The vehemence with which some modern Buddhists defend their "Buddhism" thus reveals what is truly at stake. It is not the Dhamma that is being protected, but a particular image of oneself as a Buddhist: progressive yet spiritual, rational yet devout, non-theistic yet religious. When this image is questioned—when someone points out that the Buddha did not teach "Buddhism" as an -ism, or that his early teaching contains no call to worship, no metaphysical consolation, and no spiritual identity to adopt—the self feels existentially threatened. Outrage rushes in to patch the crack.

This is righteous indignation without a god. The structure is familiar; only the object has changed. The Abrahamic believer defends the honor of God or scripture; the modern achievement-Buddhist defends the honor of "my Buddhism," which is simply another name for "myself as I wish to be seen."

The Buddha's teaching cuts directly across this reflex. In text after text, he dismantles the very stance that righteous indignation presupposes. There is no "self" to be made pure, no identity to be secured, no label to be sanctified. There is only this contingent flow of conditions to be understood. To mistake "Buddhism" for something that must be defended is already to have lost sight of the Dhamma.

If Han is right, the *transparency society* will continue to encourage this confusion. It will reward visible devotion over quiet understanding, spectacle over subtlety, identity over insight. The challenge for the modern practitioner is therefore not simply to adopt "Buddhism" more sincerely, but to notice how swiftly the mind tries to turn it into a possession—and how fiercely it moves to protect that possession once formed.

To see this clearly is already to step outside of it. The moment one recognizes that what is being defended is not the Buddha's teaching but a fragile self-image draped in Buddhist language, indignation loses its footing. What remains is the work the Buddha actually prescribed: not to guard a label, but to investigate the processes of clinging that arise around it. At that point, "Buddhism" ceases to be an object of possession and returns to what it was never meant to stop being: a convenient name for a path that, in its deepest sense, has no owner and no defender—only those who walk it.

Chapter 12 – Of What Use Are the Buddha's Teachings?

"*Beware the barrenness of a busy life.*" — Socrates[1]

Of what use are the Buddha's teachings? The question may sound heretical to those who treat the word Buddhist as a moral badge or a lifestyle choice, but it is an important one. Underneath that tree, his communion with something greater than himself produced a grail so profound, that despite 2,600 years, still holds its value. But to the disappointment of some, he was not founding a religion but actually dismantling the elemental foundations upon which every religion is constructed.

An accepted modern explanation for the formation of religion by humankind, indeed by the historian, the philosopher, and the anthropologist all nod in agreement that religion arose from humankind's need to explain its surroundings.[2] Storms, seasons, birth, and death—each demanded a reason, a will behind the veil. Humankind seemed to fester with the idea of mystery – there must be a reason – a cause. The gods, then, were hypotheses born of unease. But perhaps the impulse ran deeper. Perhaps this effort to explain was not simply about control or fear, but about naming something that could not be named—the sense of "Otherness" that shimmered just beyond comprehension.

Here the defenders of faith would eagerly interject, "Yes, precisely—the Other is God! What other explanation could there be?" Again, humankind wrestling with mystery – back to square one. And so, the saga continues. To them, the argument confirms rather than challenges belief. Yet this is where the Buddha's insight cuts through the chorus. For the "Other" that he encountered beneath the Bodhi tree was not a deity at all. It had no name, no personality, no commandments. It was not a being that loved, judged or was jealous, but the condition in which all being unfolds.

The irony, of course, is that when the religious mind hears this, it still rushes to clothe it in familiar garments. "Yes, exactly," it cries, "God is beyond definition!" And yet in declaring God beyond definition, it has already defined Him—as something beyond, as

some sort of all aware mind whose thoughts we can never know. This is the paradox that quietly sabotages the theological enterprise: the attempt to describe what one insists is indescribable. Without consciousness, without the mind of humankind, would God exist?

The Buddha avoided that trap by refusing to give the mystery a name. He did not personify the Other; he observed it. To him, the mystery was not a mind behind the universe but the immediate, unmediated presence of things as they are—an intimacy so complete it required no myth. The "Other" was not elsewhere, it was the world itself, seen without the filter of craving or the projection of self.

That is why his awakening was not a revelation from beyond but a recognition of what is already here. The Other, in his sense, has no restrictions outside the thinker's own ocean of understanding, belief, or opinion. It is boundless precisely because it is not a being but a condition—the condition of direct knowing freed from the machinery of interpretation.

In this way, the Buddha did not destroy the gods; he rendered them unnecessary. He dismantled the scaffolding of explanation that humanity had built around its fear of not-knowing. Where others filled the silence with stories, he entered it. And in that silence, he found the only grail worth finding: not divine revelation, but clarity.

The metaphor of the grail serves us well here, provided we handle it carefully. The Western imagination made the grail a cup—holy, elusive, the vessel that caught divine blood and promised eternal life. It became the ultimate prize for the striving hero, the final trophy of quest and conquest. Every knight who rode out in search of it was really searching for himself, and inevitably returned empty-handed. The Buddha's grail was the opposite kind of vessel. He did not discover it by travelling outward but by ceasing to travel at all.

He found that the cup we keep chasing is the one we are forever trying to fill—experiencing the feelings of discouragement, dissatisfaction and anxiety that comes with the realization that it

cannot be filled. The modern subject is no different from the knight of medieval romance, except that the quest has moved inside the skull. We ladle ambition, approval, and affirmation into the self as if they might one day brim over into completion. Yet the cup leaks its contents as fast as it is filled. It is a vessel carved out of craving, and craving has no bottom.

What the Buddha discovered was not a trick, but the clear knowledge that it is not to fill the cup, but to stop mistaking it for a vessel at all. The mind of the modern *achievement society* person has become the grail, and we are on a never-ending quest to fill it to the brim. He saw that the very act of grasping after satisfaction keeps the sense of lack alive – keeps that sense of void inside of us ever present. His insight was not mystical revelation but psychological reversal: the realization that the thirst for fullness is itself the drought.

In this sense, the Buddha's grail was the inverse of the Western one. The grail myth is ours, which promises eternal life if only we drink deeply enough; the Buddha's grail offers peace when we finally stop drinking. It is not a cup of plenty but a cup of cessation. The healing property lies not in what it holds but, in its capacity to be empty without despair.

Han's *achievement society* is a vast congregation of cup-fillers.[3] Its members labor at the cistern day and night, convinced that just one more ladle of productivity, one more spoonful of recognition, will deliver us what we want. Like the cursed basin in Dumbledore's cave, the more one drinks, the more one thirsts. The Buddha's grail, by contrast, asks nothing to be poured in. It heals by showing that the cup was never dry—only overfilled with delusion.

The Buddha's grail was not a chalice to be possessed but an emptiness to be understood—a realization that when craving stops, the heart becomes the vessel that can finally hold peace.

Where the European myth made the cup sacred because of what it contained, the Buddha made it sacred because of what it no longer needed to contain. His grail was not filled with blood of sacrifice but with silence – empty of desire and craving.

We can imagine, if we like, that the Buddha's grail was the mind itself—purified of its sediment of desire and fear, clear enough to reflect the world without distortion. He called it *nibbāna*, the extinguishing of the fires that cause dissatisfaction and suffering.[4] There is no relic to display, no artifact to guard, no shrine that can contain it. That is why, in a sense, it has survived. Myths can be stolen; insight cannot.

In our own *achievement society*, the grail has been resurrected in the guise of therapy, self-help, mindfulness and meditation apps - spiritual consumerism. Each new method claims to offer the healing cup at last, conveniently bottled, branded, and sold at retail. Yet what the Buddha discovered cannot be packaged. The moment you grasp for it, it vanishes. It is not something to possess but a way of seeing that renders possession unnecessary.

To seek the Buddha's grail is to unlearn the knight's journey—to stop galloping toward transcendence and to sit down with your own mind – your own beliefs and opinions – your own craving and attachment to comfort. You do not need a tree to sit under, merely a chair in your living room. It is to recognize that the search for comfort and certainty itself is the sickness, and that the cure was never lost – it has always been here, right under our noses. The healing property of this grail is simple honesty: seeing things as they are, without embellishment or denial. It does not make one holy or heroic; it makes one sane.

Perhaps the great irony is that the grail legend, in its deepest layer, already hints at this truth. In some versions, the hero finally beholds the cup only when he stops asking for it, when he simply tends to the wound of the king or the suffering of others. In that moment of self-forgetting, the grail reveals itself. The Buddha would have smiled at that ending. For the wound and the cure are not separate. The grail was never elsewhere – it has always been right in front of us.

Buddhism in the *Achievement Society*

What passes for Buddhism in the *achievement society* is largely the triumph of branding over understanding – marketing over absorption. The Buddha, who spent his life diagnosing the exhaustion caused by craving, has been repackaged as the patron saint of productivity, calmness that is indeed calming, but devoid of meaning. His likeness sells scented candles and smartphone apps promising "mindful focus" for better quarterly performance. The path to the cessation of suffering has been reduced to a technique for managing stress—a sedative for the very disease he sought to cure.

The Efficiency of Suffering

It is inevitable that the person who is a product of the *achievement society* will defend what appears to work. The new Buddhism—its apps, seminars, and neatly timed meditations—has brought measurable results. People do sleep better. Productivity increases. Tempers shorten less easily. From the standpoint of efficiency, the *yes-society* system performs beautifully.

But the Buddha did not speak of efficiency; he spoke of freeing oneself from the causes of suffering altogether. So, the question is not whether these practices produce calm, but whether that calm endures when the structure collapses—when the job is lost, the body weakens, or the algorithms change. What the *achievement society* calls "success" in meditation is often the refinement of control: the ability to manage emotion, to optimize attention, to remain functional within the system. It is valuable, but it is not freedom.

When the Buddha spoke of calm—*samatha*—it was never an end in itself. It was the stillness in which insight (vipassanā) could see clearly the nature of the mind. He taught peace not to make life bearable, but to make reality visible. To those accustomed to

progress metrics, this distinction seems trivial; to the one who begins to see, it is the difference between sedation and awakening.

If the modern meditator were to ask the Buddha, "But my meditation app, my daily aphorisms, and my little Buddha statue on my desk, make me more productive, more centered, less stressed—and isn't that good thing?" he might answer, "It is good as medicine for the fever, but not as cure." He would not condemn the relief, but he would not mistake it for health. He would point out that stress management does not end craving; it merely reconfigures it. The drive to control suffering becomes another form of clinging. One is calm about one's bondage rather than free of it.

This is the subtlety the achievement mind cannot yet see: that what it calls improvement is often the deepening of dependency. The calm derived from an app or a technique, however genuine, is fragile; it depends on conditions. When those conditions vanish, so does the calm. The Buddha's peace is of another kind—it does not depend on what happens. It is not achieved; it is uncovered.

To respond, then, to the modern defender of commodified Buddhism is not to argue but to invite inquiry. Yes, your practice brings comfort—but what happens when conditions change and the comfort ends? What remains when the app is deleted, when the breath falters, when the structure fails? That remainder—the mind that meets loss—is where the Buddha's teaching begins. Comfort, no matter how stable it may seem, depends on certain conditions. Conditions change.

The *achievement society* measures success by continuity; the Dhamma measures understanding by cessation. The two are not enemies, but they are not the same path. One refines the wheel; the other steps off it.

If the *transparent society* has done anything to the Buddha's philosophy, it is this: yes, it has made it visible, but at the expense of depth. Everything must now be seen, shared, posted, hash tagged, displayed, aphorized. The ancient practice of inward observation has been reversed into exhibitionism. The meditator no longer looks within but checks the mirror of social affirmation for signs of serenity. The result is an emptiness more profound than

ignorance: the conviction that one is already enlightened because one looks the part – has the cushion – owns a crystal healing bowl, and chants with words not understood.

The Soma of the Yes-Society

In 1932, writer Aldous Huxley imagined a future that looked, to his contemporaries, fantastical—a world of perfect order, perfect pleasure, and perfect control. In his novel *Brave New World*, humanity had at last solved the problem of suffering. Children were engineered in laboratories; emotions were chemically balanced; art, love, and tragedy had been replaced by comfort. Conflict was obsolete because contentment was mandatory. When dissatisfaction threatened to appear, it was erased with a state-issued drug called Soma—a pill that could banish anxiety, grief, or thought itself within minutes. "Christianity without tears," Huxley called it.[5]

The citizens of that world were perpetually cheerful, sexually free, and socially stable. They worked efficiently, played obediently, and slept without dreams. They were healthy, productive, and empty. The price of happiness was the extinction of depth. Pain, art, and contemplation—the very forces that once made human beings self-aware—had been quietly outlawed. The world was calm, and consciousness was gone.

Eerily, when we read *Brave New World* today, it no longer feels like prophecy; it feels like reportage. The technology has changed, but the logic remains: eliminate discomfort, and you eliminate disturbance; eliminate disturbance, and you eliminate the need for thought. What Huxley captured was not a future dystopia but a psychological trajectory—the human tendency to trade awareness for anesthesia whenever awareness becomes painful.

The *achievement society*, with its cult of positivity and its obsession with productivity, has perfected this trade. It has no pill named Soma, but it has built an entire civilization around the same principle: relief without reflection, pleasure without pause. Its

citizens are soothed by digital affirmations, sedated by entertainment, and reassured by the constant hum of busyness. Anxiety is treated not by understanding its cause but by numbing it with distraction.

The Buddha would have recognized this as the modern form of craving—the desperate wish to avoid feeling.[6] Huxley's Soma silenced the mind with chemistry; our Soma does it with stimulation. Both serve the same purpose: to protect the self from the shock of seeing itself clearly.

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* is not just a dystopia; it is a laboratory of the *yes-society*. His imagined citizens are perpetually content, but at the cost of consciousness itself. Soma is not a drug of pleasure; it is a drug of prevention—preventing depth, awareness, disquiet, reflection, and, therefore, awakening.

Huxley's Soma was not a narcotic in the ordinary sense. It did not intoxicate; it pacified. It was contentment in capsule form—instant relief without consequence, pleasure without remainder. Its genius was that it solved the problem of suffering by making reflection unnecessary. The citizens of *Brave New World* did not rebel because they had no reason to; their pain had been chemically edited out.

The *achievement society* has invented its own Soma, though it is not swallowed but streamed. It is built into the feedback loops of affirmation and productivity, into the notifications that drip-feed recognition. It hums in the algorithms that anticipate our desires before we can name them. It flows through corporate wellness programs, curated spirituality, and the soft narcotics of constant connection. Its formula is psychological rather than chemical: dopamine for pleasure, metrics for meaning, mindfulness for control.

The Soma of the *yes-society* is positivity itself—the cult of good vibes, the faith in perpetual progress, the conviction that everything, including unhappiness, can be optimized. It is a civilization-wide anesthesia, maintaining morale through metrics, sedation through success. The achievement subject swallows this drug hourly in the form of likes, affirmations, and the glow of

productivity dashboards. It numbs the discomfort that might otherwise become insight.

The Comfort Effect

Like any narcotic, the modern Soma does not simply soothe; it conditions. Its users mistake the absence of pain for health, the dull hum of satisfaction for peace. The achievement subject, like Huxley's citizens, believes the drug has cured his suffering because he no longer feels it. But the absence of pain is not the same as the presence of clarity. Comfort is the side-effect masquerading as the cure.

The brilliance and effectiveness of this modern narcotic lies in its subtlety. It leaves no track marks, no hangover, no crime. Its dosage is measured in convenience and affirmation—ergonomic chairs, curated playlists, preemptive apologies. Its chemistry is cultural: one part pleasure, one part predictability, stirred by the illusion of control. We consume it not through the mouth but through the mind, sip by sip, scroll by scroll. Its flavor is safety.

Comfort feels harmless, even virtuous. It sells itself as self-care, wellness, stability. But the effect is cumulative. The more we taste it, the less capable we become of living without it. The threshold for discomfort drops until even silence feels abrasive. The mind begins to confuse stillness with threat. And so, the user must increase the dose—more screens, more plans, more reassurance—to maintain equilibrium. The drug has done its work: it has made us dependent on the conditions it creates.

As previously discussed, the Buddha would have called this *upādāna*, clinging.[7] Comfort is its most refined form. The achievement subject spends enormous energy protecting the very sensations that keep him asleep. What he calls "a balanced life" is often a defensive architecture built to preserve the illusion of balance. Beneath the surface calm lies a quiet panic: what if the comfort stops? How can I let go of my addiction to comfort?

This is the trap of the *yes-society*. It promises relief but delivers fragility. Its citizens live inside a perpetual low-grade intoxication—calm, efficient, and anesthetized. The discomfort that might have ripened into insight is suppressed before it can mature. The mind is pacified into blindness. What Huxley imagined as a chemical sedative; we have realized as a psychological one. Comfort has become the modern form of ignorance: pleasant, pervasive, and nearly impossible to renounce.

This, the Buddha would have recognized as *taṇhā*, craving. He diagnosed the same mechanism long before Huxley gave it a name: *the mind's hunger to feel good and its terror of feeling otherwise*. Craving does not merely seek pleasure—it seeks the extinction of unease. It is psychological Soma. The *achievement society* has simply industrialized this craving and marketed it as wellness.

What makes Soma such an apt metaphor is not its chemistry but its function: it removes the capacity for *nibbidā*—the disenchantment necessary for awakening.[8] The citizens of Huxley's world could not experience disgust with their own condition; they were too comfortable to question it. So too with the achievement subject. Perpetual affirmation prevents the shock of recognition. The Buddha's *First Noble Truth*— "This is suffering"—cannot pierce the membrane of soft positivity.[9]

To refuse Soma, to refuse comfort, whether pharmacological or ideological, is to re-enter discomfort—to feel again what the system has numbed. This, paradoxically, is where the Dhamma begins. The first step toward awareness is the recovery of sensitivity: the willingness to feel pain without reaching for the next dose of distraction – the next does of comfort, no matter how subtle it may appear. The Buddha did not promise bliss; he promised clarity, and clarity hurts before it heals.

So, the question becomes: can a person born into the *yes-society* recognize that their happiness functions like Huxley's drug? Can they see that the comfort they cherish is the very mechanism of their confinement? The Dhamma's challenge is to detoxify not the body but perception itself—to withdraw from the narcotic of

certainty, from the false serenity that comes from never having to ask "Why?"

The Incurable Normal

There is an irony at the heart of modernity. Those most in need of the Buddha's prescription approach it with the very affliction it was designed to heal. The achievement subject comes to the Dhamma like a patient who brings his illness to the doctor and then insists on keeping it. The self that seeks insight and reason wants it as another acquisition—an experience, a credential, a glow of moral superiority to be displayed like a diploma on the wall of the mind.

The problem is epistemic as well as psychological. If everyone shares the same subtle disease, who can recognize it as disease? When fatigue, distraction, and self-absorption become the cultural baseline, they are mistaken for health. The *transparent society* does not believe it is unwell because it measures wellness by visibility and comfort. Its members sleep poorly but think clearly; they are restless but productive. What better sign of thriving could there be? The patient insists he is fine because everyone around him is coughing in tune.

The Buddha's diagnosis, when heard through such ears, must sound perverse. He speaks of suffering in a world that equates happiness with the avoidance of pain, of relinquishment in a world that sells attachment as intimacy, of cessation in a world that worships growth. To the achievement subject, this is not medicine but heresy. The mind steeped in comfort hears the word renunciation and imagines deprivation. The teaching that offers release appears, through the lens of craving, as a threat to pleasure.

The Buddha's revolution was cognitive, not social. He was teaching people to recognize that their experience of reality is conditioned by perception, by craving, by the interpretive machinery of the mind. But this is precisely what the *transparent society* cannot admit: that its own way of seeing might be the

problem. The Age has made its distortions invisible by baptizing them as progress.

The modern disease, then, is not mere greed or haste; it is blindness to its own blindness. When comfort becomes the highest good, anything that disturbs comfort looks like cruelty.

The reaction to this truth is so viral, so instant, it is like sticking your finger in someone's eye. The Buddha's first truth—that existence as ordinarily lived is unsatisfactory—sounds almost impolite. It violates the etiquette of positivity. His second truth—that craving is the cause of this unsatisfactoriness—seems to attack the economy itself. And his third—that there can be cessation—makes no sense in a culture that has forgotten how to stop consuming, chasing and craving comfort.

In such an atmosphere, even the word "liberation" has been repurposed. It now means the right to choose one's own distractions, to curate one's own comforts. Freedom has become the freedom to stay asleep. The Buddha's liberation—the radical quiet that follows insight—is invisible to those who can no longer tell stillness from emptiness.

And yet, paradoxically, this very blindness is the doorway. The individual living in the *achievement society* suffers not despite comfort, but because of it. The mind's unspoken unease—the background hum of inadequacy that no success can silence—is itself the whisper of truth. The same discontent that fuels burnout is the crack through which light enters. The hole that we carry around inside of us is felt because it is where the answers are. The difficulty of seeing the Buddha's teaching in such an age is precisely what makes it necessary. The disease hides the cure in plain sight.

Perhaps that is why the Buddha's voice still carries through the static of the centuries. It speaks to the part of us that knows something is wrong with our kind of rightness, that feels the falseness of perpetual ease. The *transparent society* can bury discomfort under technology, but not extinguish it. Even the most polished "self" eventually glimpses the hollowness beneath its reflection. And when that moment comes—when the achievement subject finally feels the weight of his own striving and craving—the

Buddha's prescription will no longer look like deprivation, but relief.

How to See

Richard Gombrich, that ever stalwart Indologist expert, and researcher of the Buddha, reminds us that the Buddha's teachings were not a set of doctrines but a method—a way of thinking about experience so revolutionary that it challenged every metaphysical assumption of his day.[10] The Buddha's genius was to transform religion into psychology and ethics into empirical inquiry. But our age has performed a reverse alchemy: it has turned his psychology back into religion, his inquiry into comfort, his revolution into décor.

In the *achievement society*, even wisdom is commodified. Mindfulness is marketed as a premium subscription service; compassion is monetized as "emotional intelligence." The Buddha taught the cessation of becoming; we have turned becoming into a business plan. He urged us to abandon clinging to the self; we have turned selflessness into a brand strategy. The result is a philosophy stripped of its danger, its challenge, its capacity to change consciousness – morphed it into "yes, I can." What remains is manufactured anesthetic Buddhism: calm, affirming, and utterly harmless.

Christopher Hitchens, the ever "in your face" pundit, might have put it this way: every age domesticates its prophets.[11] We have taken the Buddha—the man who urged us to abandon the illusion of ownership—and taught him to sell wellness packages. We have made his silence into a slogan. We repeat his words without ever encountering the strange and unsettling world he was describing: a world in which nothing, not even "I," stands still long enough to be possessed.

The *transparent society* cannot abide that kind of mystery. It confuses visibility with understanding, confession with honesty, and exposure with truth. The Buddha's teaching, which depended

on a slow and often uncomfortable intimacy with one's own mind, has been flattened into spectacle. The inward gaze he prescribed has been replaced by the forward-facing camera. The Dhamma has been turned outward, its insight into impermanence neutralized by constant distraction.

If the Buddha's philosophy now seems inert, it is not because it has lost its power, but because we have lost our capacity for quiet encounter, and we love our ignorance. The fault lies not with the teaching but with the temperament of the age. His path requires patience, reflection, and an acceptance of uncertainty—all qualities that the achievement subject regards as inefficiency. We have built a civilization on speed, and then wondered why it cannot heal.

To return to the question—of what use are the Buddha's teachings? —the answer depends on whether we can still listen to them without trying to own them. The Buddha's voice has not faded; it has merely been drowned out by applause. To hear him again, one must dare to be unproductive for a while, to look not at the image of the Buddha but at the mechanism of craving within oneself. Only then does his prescription become intelligible: not another task to complete, but the end of the compulsion to complete anything at all.

To see, therefore, in the sense the Buddha meant, is not to add another achievement to the list. It is not the sharpness of vision that counts, but the absence of interference. Seeing begins when the eye of habit blinks. When the constant commentary that says this is good, this is bad, this is mine, falls silent for even a moment, the world appears without negotiation. That moment is the beginning of understanding.

For the one steeped in the ideology of the *yes-society*, this is the hardest thing imaginable, because it is not an act but a release. The achievement subject is trained to believe that everything valuable must be earned, that insight too can be produced by diligence and optimized through practice. But the Buddha's method was the undoing of that reflex. Seeing does not come from trying to see; it comes from ceasing to insist.

To begin, one need not flee the world, only pause within it. Notice the restlessness that drives each thought toward the next. Notice how the mind constantly reaches forward, like a hand groping for reassurance. That reaching is the *yes-society* alive within you. To see it is already to step outside it.

The Buddha called this simple noticing *sati*, awareness. It is the practice that precedes all others, the lamp that reveals the machinery of craving. When awareness looks directly, without preference, the achievement mind begins to falter. Its slogans lose volume; its urgency thins. The calm that follows is not the calm of comfort but of comprehension—the peace that arises when the chase pauses and the world, at last, stops shimmering into something else.[12]

Seeing, then, is not discovery but disclosure. Nothing new is added; something false is removed. The Buddha's entire revolution rests on this reversal: that wisdom is not accumulation but subtraction, not a new horizon but the end of distortion. When the mind no longer insists on arranging experience to its liking, understanding dawns as naturally as daylight follows night.

So, if there is an answer to the question—Of what use are the Buddha's teachings? —it is this: they teach us how to see. Not how to believe, not how to improve, but how to look without the narcotic of comfort, without the reflex to affirm or deny. To see in this way is to awaken from the *yes-society's* hypnosis, to return to a simplicity so direct it feels at first like loss. Yet in that loss lies everything the achievement mind has been seeking.

To see, in the Buddha's sense, is to stop running. To stop running is to realize that you were never truly lost.

Complexity Neither Infers Truth nor Value

Reading Gombrich's *What the Buddha Thought*, I find myself nodding in emphatic agreement with his observation that it is believed or assumed that the Buddha's philosophy is difficult to comprehend because it is genuinely complex—philosophically

deep, psychologically intricate, and irreducible to slogans.[13] I have always found the Buddha's teachings to be simple, direct and amazingly insightful.

From my own experience, I cannot quite agree that the Buddha's teaching is difficult to comprehend. To me it has always felt disarmingly simple—so simple, in fact, that one wonders why it had to wait for a genius to say it aloud. When I first encountered the Dhamma, it did not feel like discovery but recognition, as if something long known had simply been brought back into focus. There is, I suspect, a faculty in the human mind—neither reason nor emotion—that resonates when truth is spoken. Perhaps it is what we call common sense before it is trained out of us: that unguarded moment when a statement feels so self-evident that the body itself relaxes in assent.

For me there was no crisis, no thunderclap of revelation. I did not come to the Buddha's words through despair or loss, but by complete happenstance. And yet, from the first hearing, their clarity felt absolute. The truths he described—impermanence, craving, the futility of clinging—were not propositions to be believed; they were observations I had already made but never articulated. The Buddha simply provided the language and the precision that turned vague intuition into understanding.

This makes me wonder whether the difficulty many people report is not in the teaching but in the state of mind that receives it. To hear the Dhamma requires a certain stillness, an honesty with oneself that modern life rarely allows. When the mind is filled with noise, truth sounds like contradiction. The Buddha called this barrier *avijjā*, ignorance—not stupidity, but the willful dullness that comes from being absorbed in one's own narratives.[14] To be attached to ignorance is to live inside a story so convincing that no other story can get in. The Buddha's words slide off the surface of such a mind like rain on wax.

It may also be that simplicity itself is the stumbling block. The achievement mind, trained to value complexity, assumes that profound truths must be hidden behind elaborate systems. When the Buddha speaks of suffering and its cessation, the modern

intellect, suspicious of the obvious, looks for metaphysics instead of method. The truth seems too plain to be profound. To understand it would mean admitting that the answer to life's unrest has been in front of us all along—and that is an insult to our sense of sophistication.

So, the problem is not that the Buddha's teaching is difficult; it is that it is difficult to accept. The mind resists what would dissolve it. His teaching does not flatter our intelligence or comfort our ambition. It simply describes how we perpetuate our own fatigue and how we might stop. For those still enchanted by the game of achievement, this is not good news. To them the Buddha's calm sounds like defeat. To the one who has begun to tire of the game, it sounds like home.

Perhaps that is the only real prerequisite for understanding the Dhamma: a readiness to stop pretending that ignorance is bliss. When that readiness arises—even by happenstance, as it did for me—the words of the Buddha no longer feel complex or foreign. They are as immediate as breathing, as familiar as honesty. The difficulty, then, is not in hearing the Buddha's teaching; it is in becoming quiet; enough to recognize that we have been hearing it all along.

So, like Gombrich, I feel a faint exasperation when I consider why the Buddha's teachings seem to remain so misunderstood. The difficulty, I suspect, is not only intellectual. It is also defensive.

We prefer quick summaries, moral lists, and step-by-step guides. The Buddha's teaching resists all of that. It requires patience, introspection, and a tolerance for ambiguity—traits that the modern psyche, trained in efficiency, finds unbearable. So, when confronted with the Dhamma's depth, people retreat behind the most convenient shield: religion. Label it a religion, and it becomes safely distant, an exotic artifact rather than a mirror. It can be admired, quoted, even marketed, without being experienced.

I sometimes wonder if this reflex is the achievement subject's last line of psychological defense. The Buddha's prescription is too close to the bone; it calls for the dismantling of the very self that

modern culture has built its empire upon. To engage with it sincerely would mean confronting the frightening possibility that much of what we call "normal" is, in fact, a refined form of ignorance. Thus, the mind performs a subtle act of denial. It dismisses the teaching as "foreign," "religious," or "impractical"—anything that will keep it from penetrating too deeply.

Perception as Prejudice

Another, subtler prejudice arises not from argument but from perception. It begins before a single word of the Buddha is heard. The modern mind, trained to see truth through the lens of novelty and relevance, glances backward twenty-five centuries and quietly dismisses what it sees. How could a man who walked barefoot under banyan trees understand the complexity of the digital age? The very distance of time becomes a defense. The past is treated as primitive, and the primitive as irrelevant.

This prejudice of perception has several layers. The first is temporal. The modern imagination mistakes chronology for progress. It assumes that wisdom, like technology, improves with each generation. But psychological truth does not evolve. The mind that suffers today is structured by the same forces—craving, aversion, ignorance—that governed the minds of ancient India, indeed of all civilizations.[15] Anxiety, envy, loneliness, and desire have not changed their nature; they have only changed their instruments. To dismiss the Buddha because he lived before the internet is to misunderstand both the Buddha and the internet. He was describing the software, not the hardware.

The second layer is geographical. Many Western readers cannot separate the Buddha from the image of India itself—its colors, rituals, and iconography. They imagine that to study the Dhamma is to enter a foreign world of temples and incense, of shaved heads and saffron robes. But these are cultural wrappings, not the Dhamma. The Buddha's teaching was not Indian in essence; it was human. He used the metaphors of his culture because those were the tools at hand. Were he alive today, he would use the metaphors

of ours—dopamine, algorithms, neural networks—and his meaning would be the same.

The third layer is cultural prejudice—the tendency to retrofit modern ideologies onto ancient contexts. We project our current India onto his India, our current religions onto his thought, and then judge the past by our present reflections. Modern India, shaped by colonialism and globalization, bears little resemblance to the world of the Ganges valley in the fifth century BCE.[16] Yet many people imagine that the Buddha emerged from the same society that produces Bollywood and silicon start-ups, and so conclude that his world, and therefore his insight, must have been parochial. The irony is that such assumptions reveal the very blindness the Buddha sought to cure: the inability to see how perception is filtered through habit.

Finally, there is the prejudice of religion itself. In an age increasingly skeptical of faith, Buddhism is filed away as one religion among many—a benign cousin of the others. To the modern secularist, religion smells faintly of control and superstition, of the *no-society's* prohibitions. The Buddha, by association, becomes another preacher of belief, another keeper of rules. This misperception is perhaps the most tragic, for his entire method was designed to free the mind from belief. He asked not for worship but for understanding. Yet because the word "Buddhism" now carries the same suffix as "Catholicism" and "Hinduism," his teaching is misheard as doctrine rather than diagnosis.

These forms of prejudice share a single root: the assumption that truth must resemble us to be true. The *achievement society* confuses familiarity with validity. What lies outside its aesthetic, beyond its era, or beneath its skin color, is quietly demoted to the category of "interesting but irrelevant." Thus, perception becomes a form of insulation; it prevents intrusion from anything that might require genuine reflection.

But the Dhamma was never bound by time or place. It speaks not to the customs of a vanished India but to the conditions of consciousness itself. The Buddha's insights do not expire because

the human nervous system has not evolved beyond craving. To see this requires setting aside the filters of perception—those automatic judgments that decide what is contemporary and what is obsolete. The Dhamma becomes audible only when the noise of such comparison stops. Then, suddenly, one sees that the mind that looks out from a smartphone screen is the same mind that once looked out from the forests of the Ganges plain—restless, desiring, afraid, and capable of awakening.

All religions share one quiet convenience: they allow their followers to outsource responsibility. However elaborate their rituals or lofty their creeds, somewhere within each lies the promise that guilt may be delegated upward. The believer's duty is not to understand the mechanism of suffering but to affirm allegiance to a power that will manage it on his behalf.

In the Abrahamic traditions this bargain is explicit. Attestation of faith becomes the master key. Sin may be chronic, confession mechanical, but forgiveness is assured. The transaction is clean and repeatable—one more ritual of exchange in which the currency is belief and the reward is absolution. The worshipper's conscience is laundered in the name of grace, while the original problem of ignorance remains untouched. It is moral bookkeeping, not transformation.

The Buddha would have recognized this structure immediately; he saw the same pattern in the Brahminical sacrifices of his own day. The priests of ancient India promised purification through ritual; their descendants promise it through creed.[17] Both systems operate on the same premise: that suffering can be outsourced, that the bill for craving can be paid by proxy. It is religion as spiritual insurance.

Small wonder that this model fits the *achievement society* so comfortably. Its theology could be summed up in a slogan familiar to both the pulpit and the marketplace: *God helps those who help themselves.* It sanctifies striving while sparing the striver from self-knowledge. The individual may work, consume, and compete without ever confronting the restlessness that drives him, because the divine—like the algorithm—will sort it out in the end.

The irony is delicious but cruel. The very faith that promises relief from responsibility ends up endorsing the same cycle of craving the Buddha exposed. It blesses the perpetual motion of becoming, calling it virtue, and disguises exhaustion as righteousness. Thus religion, which once claimed to save the soul, now merely tranquilizes the ego.

The Buddha's prescription was the opposite: no confession, no transaction, no celestial accounting. He offered only a mirror—one that reflects, without judgment, the machinery of cause and effect. Responsibility in his system is radical because it cannot be delegated. No god, no priest, no guru can burn the fire of craving for you. The work must be done in the mind that kindled it.

The pattern is familiar to any psychiatrist. A patient visits reluctantly, describing the symptoms but hoping to be told that nothing serious is wrong. When the diagnosis finally arrives, the first reaction is disbelief, even anger. The mind closes ranks around its illness, preferring the known misery of dysfunction to the unknown labor of change. In precisely this way, the achievement subject approaches the Buddha's Dhamma. The very recognition of suffering feels like a threat to the comfort the culture has elevated to sacred status.

The Buddha, of course, anticipated this. He knew that ignorance is not merely the absence of knowledge but an active process—a defense mechanism built into consciousness itself. He called it *avijjā* - ignorance, and he placed it at the beginning of the entire chain of dependent origination.[18] It is not that we do not know; it is that we do not wish to know. The truth is too destabilizing, too subversive to the stories we tell about who we are and what we deserve.

Seen in this light, the so-called "difficulty" of the Buddha's philosophy is a mirror held up to our collective anxiety. His thought is not esoteric; it is simply unwilling to flatter us. The mind recoils from the Dhamma the way the eye recoils from bright sunlight—not because the light is obscure, but because it is too clear.

The Counterfeit Sangha – The Counterfeit Teacher

The greatest danger for the modern seeker is not disbelief, but false belief. In an age where even sincerity is monetized, the path to freedom is lined with detours that all promise arrival. The *achievement society* has perfected the art of selling the illusion of depth. It offers "mindfulness" without self-examination, "community" without discipline, and "awakening" without the discomfort of seeing oneself clearly. To those already anxious for progress, this is irresistible. It feels like therapy, religion, and self-improvement harmonized into one consumable whole. The sickness learns to mimic the cure. How, then, is one to tell the difference between a teacher of Dhamma and a dealer in comfort?

First, listen for the sound of reassurance. The *achievement society* sells reassurance because reassurance is profitable. A teacher who continually tells you that you are "perfect as you are" or that "everything is already awakening," is offering sedation, not liberation. The Buddha never flattered his students; he respected them enough to tell them the truth — that suffering is real, its cause is within us, and its ending demands work. The Dhamma soothes only after it has unsettled.

Second, notice what is being promised. When a teacher or organization offers certainty — "You will attain enlightenment," "You will be transformed in ten days," "You will achieve inner peace" — you are no longer in the company of the Buddha. You are in the marketplace. The Buddha never sold outcomes; he taught causes. He did not promise enlightenment; he described the conditions under which ignorance ceases. The difference is everything.

Third, watch for dependence. A true teacher directs attention away from themselves. Their purpose is to make the student independent of teachers. The charlatan cultivates attachment, makes themselves indispensable, builds a brand. The Buddha said, "*He who sees the Dhamma sees me.*"[19] In other words, the teaching itself is the teacher. A Dhamma that points back to a person rather than to direct observation of mind is counterfeit.

Fourth, observe the relationship with money and recognition. The Buddha accepted food because monks had to eat, not because they had a "retreat fee." The genuine lineage of the Dhamma survives wherever generosity remains mutual — where teaching is given freely or with minimal expectation, where humility outweighs marketing, and where prestige has no currency. In the economy of awakening, profit is always a sign of decay.

Finally, look at the atmosphere of the community. The genuine sangha is defined by modesty, simplicity, and good humor. It is not solemn, competitive, or hierarchical. Members listen more than they speak; they help rather than advise. Their practice produces kindness, not specialness. Wherever you see spiritual status, proprietary jargon, or a subtle air of superiority, the spirit of the *achievement society* has already taken root.

If all of these signs are absent, one may be on safe ground. If any are present, the seeker must rely on the Buddha's final instruction: be a lamp unto yourself. Do not reject a teacher harshly — but do not surrender discernment. The Dhamma's first requirement is honesty. If what you hear feels like comfort rather than clarity, if it strengthens self-importance rather than insight, step back. The Buddha's path is not soothing; it is cleansing. It removes the illusions on which comfort depends.

To realize this distinction is to understand why the Buddha's teaching still confounds the achievement mind. The Dhamma does not promise a better version of the self; it reveals that the self was the problem all along. No organization or teacher that caters to self-improvement can ever transmit that truth. The genuine teacher, like the Dhamma itself, will eventually vanish from view, leaving only awareness — solitary, sufficient, and free.

Among the signs of a counterfeit sangha is an air of comfort. Not comfort as in shelter from rain or the kindness of hospitality, but comfort as ideology. Many modern Buddhist centers are arranged less like places of inquiry and more like sanctuaries of affirmation—soft lighting, curated serenity, carefully priced silence. The care and expense devoted to comfort become an unspoken message: this is a

refuge from discomfort, not a confrontation with it. The student is soothed before being challenged, consoled before being instructed. It is a subtle betrayal of the Buddha's method. The Buddha never sold comfort.

He offered clarity, and clarity is often uncomfortable. His first teaching, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, begins not with peace but with diagnosis: dukkha—suffering, unsatisfactoriness, the restlessness woven through existence.[20] That recognition was always the beginning. In discourse after discourse, he would lead listeners first to see the symptom, then its cause, and only then the possibility of its cessation. He did not ask anyone to believe in him; he asked them to look at their own experience.

The Theater of Serenity

In the *achievement society*, even atmosphere becomes ideology. Whether an organization or a teacher, the introduction and importance of using singing bowls, bells, soft music, or ambient rainfall are not expressions of understanding but symptoms of substitution. They replace inquiry with immersion. Their purpose is not to reveal the mind but to manage it. The Buddha never asked his followers or those who would become teachers to create an environment in which the Dhamma would sound beautiful; he asked them to listen until the noise of craving went silent.

When meditation requires a soundtrack, awakening becomes a performance. The modern sangha sells serenity by the hour, crafting the sensory equivalent of holiness: dim lighting, scent diffusers, chimes calibrated to the frequencies of calm. These things are not evil in themselves, but their effect is cumulative. They train the mind to associate stillness with setting rather than seeing. The Buddha's stillness was not conditional—it arose in the dust, on the roadside, beneath the noise of the world.

A counterfeit teacher or organization knows that mood sells better than insight. Assuring an already comfort infected *achievement society* person with such things provides the teacher or the organization with an effective hook. The achievement subject,

exhausted by productivity, seeks not truth but atmosphere—a place where exhaustion feels elegant. And so, the modern temple becomes a spa of the self. One enters not to dissolve identity but to refurbish it, to leave feeling "balanced," "restored," "recharged." The ancient path to the cessation of craving is rebranded as recovery from burnout. It promises calm without confrontation, mindfulness without morality, transcendence without transformation.

The Buddha would have recognized this as a refinement of *taṇhā*—craving in its most delicate form. The craving now is not for wealth or pleasure, but for mood. It is craving disguised as peace. The soft music and diffused light merely reproduce the drug of comfort in another register, a subtler Soma for the weary modern mind. The problem is not that these settings exist, but that they become mistaken for the Dhamma itself. They encourage the delusion that enlightenment has an ambience.

A genuine teacher, by contrast, creates no such theater. Their setting may be austere, even plain, because their purpose is to strip away dependency on the sensory world, not to enhance it. They teach that stillness does not come from suppressing noise but from seeing the futility of reacting to it. The sound of rain, the hum of a city, the chatter of thought—these are not obstacles but objects of awareness. To require silence before one can see is to confess blindness.

Form Without Essence

An interesting question arises when observing the achievement-society's version of Buddhism: if all the décor and devices were removed—if the singing bowls fell silent, the incense burned out, the ambient rain recordings ceased—would what remained still be called Buddhism? The answer, though uncomfortable, reveals the extent to which the achievement mind has replaced insight with aesthetic.

For many, these accoutrements are not enhancements but essentials. The fragrance of sandalwood, the tone of bronze, the measured cadence of a voice leading meditation—these have become what modern "Buddhism" feels like. They are not tools for quieting the mind, but triggers for sentimentality. The achievement subject, trained to respond to sensory cues, seeks in ritual the same feedback loop that governs their digital life: stimulus, response, reward. The form provides reassurance that something spiritual is happening, even when nothing of the mind has been touched.

The irony is that the Buddha himself used forms only as provisional tools. His earliest followers chanted not to create mood but to preserve memory; their simplicity was functional, not decorative.[21] Over time, form ossified into ornament. The bell that once called attention to the present moment now signifies the performance of mindfulness. The lotus has become a logo, used as a symbol of Buddhism, but with no understanding as to why. The sacred object has been recast as a consumer artifact—proof of affiliation rather than evidence of understanding.

So, if one were to strip away every trace of atmosphere—no incense, no chants, no flowing robes, no recorded rain—would what remains still be Buddhism? The answer depends on whether one understands what the Buddha actually taught. If one believes that Buddhism is the experience of tranquility induced by environment, then without its atmosphere it disappears. But if one understands that Buddhism begins where illusion ends, then what remains is precisely the point: awareness, bare and unadorned.

The Buddha's Dhamma requires no setting. It is not a soundscape but a seeing. The smell of incense does not bring clarity; the mind that does not cling to incense does. What survives when all accoutrements are removed is the only part that ever mattered—the capacity to observe, to understand, and to let go. The rest is stagecraft.

The *achievement society* cannot bear this simplicity. It confuses the absence of stimulation with emptiness, and emptiness with loss. But the Buddha's path leads through precisely that space—the quiet beyond form, where nothing can be purchased, and therefore

nothing can be lost. That is where the Dhamma begins to breathe again.

In this way, the counterfeit sangha or teacher is not defined by its aesthetics but by its avoidance. Wherever the message is comfort rather than comprehension, there the Dhamma has been replaced by décor. And yet, the Dhamma remains unaltered. It does not depend on gongs or incense to reveal itself. It is available to anyone willing to look directly—without ambiance, without anesthesia, without the soft illusion of calm. If the modern accoutrements of the achievement society sangha, such as singing bowls, bells, elaborate costumes, scent diffusers, soothing music, chants, incense, firm meditation cushions, and so on, were removed, would it still be Buddhism – would it still be the Dhamma?

The Counterfeit Teacher

The Buddha was not naïve about teachers. He lived in an age crowded with gurus, philosophers, and ascetics, all claiming insight into the nature of reality. Some practiced austerities so severe they bordered on self-torture; others promised liberation through ritual or ecstatic experience. The Buddha moved among them for years, studied with their leaders, and found that most were intoxicated not with wisdom but with their own certainty. It was in this noisy marketplace of enlightenment that he learned to distinguish the genuine from the counterfeit.

Whether an organization or a teacher, the introduction and importance of using the accoutrements associated with "Buddhism," are not a necessary part of understanding the teachings of the Buddha.

In the *Vīmaṃsaka Sutta* (Majjhimā Nikāya 47), he laid down a principle as daring now as it was then: never believe a teacher simply because they are a teacher—not even the Buddha himself.[22] He told his disciples to investigate him, to observe whether his conduct was pure, whether his words matched his actions, and whether his mind was free from greed, hatred, and delusion. Only

after such scrutiny, he said, should confidence arise. The Buddha was inviting doubt, not forbidding it. In this, he broke entirely with the religious conventions of his time, which demanded reverence before inquiry. For him, truth was not validated by charisma or lineage, but by coherence between word and deed. In essence, the student was to approach the teacher with skepticism.

A counterfeit teacher, therefore, is not merely one who speaks falsehood, but one whose teaching does not transform. The Buddha explained that a true Dhamma must lead to *virāga*—dispassion; *nirodha*—cessation; and *upasama*—peace.[23] The test is not eloquence, but effect. Does the teaching diminish craving, conceit, and delusion, or does it feed them? The difference can be subtle. A clever counterfeit may speak of compassion yet cultivate dependence, speak of mindfulness yet reinforce ego, speak of non-attachment yet build a brand. The counterfeit teacher comforts; the true teacher confronts. It is often that the counterfeit teacher will weave a very intricate web of conceit, presenting themselves as one in the know; the one with the knowledge, and therefore separate from the rest of those who are in the audience. In other words, to the watchful eye and ear, the conceited teacher manufactures a kind of humility that they know fixes their position as the one with the knowledge, the oracle, the authority.

In the *Cankī Sutta* (Majjhimā Nikāya 95), the Buddha went further, dissecting the very foundations of belief.[24] He warned that people cling to doctrines for many reasons—because of the shortcut desire to have faith, to follow a tradition, to cling to logic, or the reputation of the teacher—but none of these reasons guarantee truth. Even reason, he said, is not final authority; it must be tested through experience. The Buddha was not asking for skepticism as rebellion, but for discernment born of humility: knowledge that refuses to be satisfied until it sees for itself.

To the monks of the *Sandaka Sutta* (Majjhimā Nikāya 76), he described whole schools of teachers as "uninspired wanderers," men lost in metaphysical speculation, denying causality, karma, and the possibility of liberation.[25] Their teachings were pleasant, he said, but sterile. They promised freedom while denying the very

conditions that make freedom possible. It is easy to imagine their descendants today: teachers who speak of "living in the now" while dismissing the discipline that allows one to stay there; teachers who celebrate "authenticity" but never mention restraint.

The *Kālāma Sutta* (Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.65) offers the most universal safeguard. The Buddha told the Kālāmas not to accept anything—tradition, scripture, logic, or authority—until they had seen its results directly. "*When you know for yourselves*," he said, "*that these things are unwholesome, blameworthy, and lead to harm, abandon them. When you know they are wholesome and lead to welfare and happiness, practice them.*"[26] In other words: the truth of a teaching lies not in its eloquence but in its consequence. This was not moral relativism but empirical ethics: test the Dhamma by the texture it leaves on your mind.

In the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (Digha Nikāya 16), as he neared death, the Buddha foresaw the rise of counterfeit teachers who would speak in his name but not in his understanding. His warning to Ānanda was explicit: "*There will be those who misrepresent me with words that are not Dhamma.*" The safeguard he offered was not an institution, but an attitude. "*Dwell with yourselves as an island*," he said, "*with the Dhamma as your refuge.*"[27] Authenticity, in his vision, could never be franchised. It lived only where discernment was alive.

From these instructions, the pattern of a counterfeit teacher becomes unmistakable. They are marked not by robes or titles but by dependence and desire—their own, and that which they foster in others. Their teachings are incomplete because they comfort without liberating. They turn the Dhamma into a performance, its purpose into productivity, its silence into spectacle. They draw disciples not to stillness but to belonging. In their presence, craving grows subtle roots, disguised as devotion.

A true teacher, by contrast, leaves no trace. Their presence generates independence, not allegiance. Their words unsettle before they soothe. They teach not what to think, but how to see. And the measure of their teaching is simple: when the student no

longer clings, the teacher has done their work. This was the Buddha's standard, and it remains the only one that cannot be counterfeited.

When a teacher or organization begins elsewhere—when talk of suffering is replaced by assurances of inherent perfection, or by techniques promising instant calm—it is safe to assume that what is being offered is not liberation but anesthesia. A genuine teaching may leave the listener momentarily unsettled; a counterfeit one leaves them comforted. The difference is moral as well as psychological. The Buddha's path begins in the willingness to see pain clearly. The counterfeit path begins by making pain palatable.

The first thing the Buddha always taught was not how to feel better, but how to see better. He described the world as it is: unstable, conditioned, impermanent. To the modern ear this sounds severe, but it is the honesty from which every form of genuine comfort must eventually grow. When that first step—this is suffering—is absent, the entire structure that follows rests on denial.

So, when one visits a so-called sangha or agrees to be taught by a teacher of the Dhamma, a few questions are worth asking quietly:

- Does the teaching begin with life as it is, or with a promise of how it could feel?
- Is the discomfort of seeing oneself encouraged, or politely avoided?
- Is the Dhamma itself—the words and methods of the Buddha—present, or replaced by slogans and sentiment.
- Does what is being taught involve the words of others rather than that of the Buddha's?

If the answer to these questions tilts toward reassurance, one may be in a house built for comfort rather than for understanding. The Buddha's own classroom was the open air, the uneven ground, the ache of the human condition. His students sat not on cushions of luxury but on the raw earth of their own lives. That is where awakening has always taken place.

Going it Alone

A reader who has come this far may find the question rising uninvited: If all of this is true, what am I to do? It is a fair question, though one the Buddha might have smiled at, for it already contains the echo of the *achievement society*'s impulse to turn insight into method, awakening into a project plan. Still, curiosity is a beginning. It shows that the ache of modern life has been felt as more than discomfort—that it has become a question worthy of investigation.

The curious reader who looks for guidance will, however, soon discover another difficulty. In the world of contemporary Buddhism, the teachings have been drawn into the same current that carries everything else—commodification, competition, the marketing of meaning. Meditation is advertised as a form of stress reduction, mindfulness as a way to optimize performance. The Buddha, who renounced gain and fame, would find his name affixed to both.

To find a teacher untouched by this transformation is rare. Most who teach today have grown up within the culture of self-improvement; its logic is the air they breathe. Even when the words of the Dhamma are spoken faithfully, they are often wrapped in the idiom of productivity: progress on the path, levels of realization, personal growth. The disease has learned to speak the language of the cure.

The genuine teacher, if one is found, will appear almost ordinary. Their concern will be precision, not persuasion. They will not promise experiences but point instead to causes and conditions, to how the mind builds and abandons its own prisons. Their teaching will be inconveniently simple. They will speak of ethics, mindfulness, and understanding as daily disciplines, not as mystical attainments. They will warn against fascination with the teacher, because fascination is merely another form of grasping. And if asked about results, they will say what the Buddha said: "Do not take my word; observe."

Such teachers are few, but the Buddha foresaw their rarity. "*If you find no companion on the path, go alone*," he advised.[28] To go alone does not mean isolation; it means reliance on the Dhamma itself as guide. The teaching, when approached with honesty, is a living teacher.

In an age of noise, this going alone may in fact be the truest form of companionship. One can begin quietly, without ceremony—by reading the earliest texts, not for belief but for comprehension. In the old discourses, the Buddha's voice still speaks with astonishing clarity. His words are those of a physician explaining the illness of the mind. Read them as one would read a medical treatise on suffering.

Then, one can begin to observe in the smallest ways. Watch a single breath. Notice the impulse to improve it. Observe the mind's constant editing of the present moment—its habit of adjusting, anticipating, narrating. That reflex is the ideology of the *achievement society* operating inside you. To see it clearly, even once, is to begin the work the Buddha prescribed.

Ethical restraint follows naturally from that seeing. The precepts are not prohibitions but the scaffolding of sanity, structures that hold the mind steady long enough for awareness to deepen. Keep them privately, without display, and life becomes less encumbered by regret, less blurred by shame. This, too, is meditation.

As understanding matures, one discovers that companionship does not always mean people. Books, honest reflection, a few like-minded friends can form a sangha as real as any monastery. What matters is not numbers but sincerity. The Buddha's path begins whenever two conditions meet: the willingness *to look* and the courage *to see*. When those are present, the Dhamma begins to teach itself.

To go alone in this sense is not a sentence of solitude but an act of integrity. It is a refusal to outsource one's awakening to institutions that have learned to sell it. It is a quiet trust that truth, once glimpsed, will keep revealing itself to the patient observer.

In the end, this was the Buddha's instruction to his disciples when his own death approached: "*Be a lamp unto yourselves.*"[29] He did not mean that one should glorify the self; he meant that each mind must become its own source of clarity. The lamp is lit not by doctrine or devotion but by attention—steady, self-reliant, and free from expectation. In a world that measures value by output, such attention is the most radical act imaginable. To go alone, in the Buddha's sense, is to cease being alone in the ordinary one. It is to stand quietly in the world as it is, and to see it, finally, as enough.

He offered clarity, and clarity is often uncomfortable. His first teaching, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, begins not with peace but with diagnosis: dukkha—suffering, unsatisfactoriness, the restlessness woven through existence.[30] That recognition was always the beginning. In discourse after discourse, he would lead listeners first to see the symptom, then its cause, and only then the possibility of its cessation. He did not ask anyone to believe in him; he asked them to look at their own experience.

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What did the Buddha Think?

In his book *What the Buddha Thought*, Richard Gombrich makes an observation that is as incisive as it is liberating: the Buddha was a radical thinker who operated within the conceptual framework of his age in order to transcend it. He did not wage war against the Brahmins; he used their language as a mirror in which their own assumptions became visible.[31] His method was philosophical aikido—turning the weight of existing belief to reveal its hidden imbalance.

The Brahmin system into which he was born was not simply a religion; it was the metaphysical nervous system of the entire culture. [32] It prescribed behavior, determined rank, and explained destiny. Brahminism taught that purity was hereditary, that knowledge was ritual, and that liberation was a privilege earned through sacrifice and birthright. Its rituals were not designed for inquiry but for maintenance—the maintenance of control, order, and certainty. The Brahmins were the custodians of meaning. To

challenge them directly would have been to challenge the entire structure of thought.

But the Buddha did something far more subtle and enduring. He used the Brahmin vocabulary—their cosmology, their moral lexicon, their metaphors—and shifted the axis.[33] Where they spoke of sacrifice to gods, he spoke of the sacrifice of greed. Where they sought purity through ritual ablution, he taught purity through intention. Where they promised rebirth in higher realms through offerings, he taught that rebirth happens moment by moment through craving. Without ever declaring war, he rendered their system psychologically obsolete.

This was not rebellion for its own sake. The Buddha understood that the human mind cannot leap into truth from a standing start; it must use the rungs of the familiar to climb beyond itself. The Brahmin doctrines of karma, rebirth, and ritual were the cognitive furniture of his time. Rather than discard them, he rearranged them until they pointed toward experience rather than authority. What had been metaphysical became empirical. Karma ceased to be the ledger of the cosmic accountant Brahma and became the law of cause-and-effect observable in one's own mind. Sacrifice ceased to be public ceremony and became private insight: the letting go of craving. In our age this is letting go of craving for comfort.

Gombrich's insight is that the Buddha's revolution was not linguistic but epistemological. He changed not the terms but the direction of knowing. In the Brahmin world, knowledge flowed downward from revelation; in the Buddha's world, it arose upward from awareness. Truth was no longer decreed—it was verified. The shift was immense. It turned religion into psychology and ritual into method. The Buddha's question was never "What should we believe?" but "What can be known, and by whom?"

This is why it would be a mistake to imagine the Buddha as an ancient debunker, a proto-atheist on a crusade to prove the Brahmins wrong. His target was not the priests themselves but the delusion that made priesthood necessary. If he lived today, he would not stand outside the cathedrals of organized belief shaking

his finger at the faithful; he would walk inside, sit among them, and ask, "What are you clinging to when you pray?"

His critique was psychological, not political. He was not fighting institutions but ignorance—those unseen structures of thought that make institutions inevitable.

In this sense, the Buddha and the Brahmins were not opponents on a battlefield of ideas; they were two different stages in the evolution of consciousness.[34] The Buddha was simply the first to see that liberation could not be given, only understood. The Brahmin promise of salvation through obedience became, in his hands, the insight that freedom comes through understanding cause and effect. Control, the engine of the Brahmin world, became the problem to be solved.

To read the Buddha this way is to see how his method transcends its time. He was not reforming religion; he was revealing the psychological conditions that give rise to it. He saw that human beings, fearing uncertainty, build systems to manage it—rituals, rules, hierarchies. But what they are really seeking is not control over life but freedom from fear. His answer was not to replace one system with another, but to turn inward to the machinery of craving itself. The real Brahmin, he said, is not the one born to privilege but the one who has burned away greed, hatred, and delusion.

In that single redefinition, he dismantled the authority of the entire caste system and replaced it with a moral and psychological order that anyone could verify. It was the most radical act of democratization the human mind had ever attempted: the liberation of truth from tradition.

Now, if the average citizen of the *achievement society* were to encounter the Buddha's teaching in the form I have outlined in this book, I believe the initial reaction would almost certainly be irritation. The Dhamma offers no applause, no affirmation of effort, no promise of a better self. It begins, instead, with an insult to modern sensibility: the confession that life as ordinarily lived is unsatisfactory.

To the achievement subject, raised on the creed of positivity, this sounds pessimistic, even ungrateful. He would protest that life is good, that progress is real, that with enough discipline and data he can manage his mind as he manages his finances. The Buddha's diagnosis feels like a personal affront.

The first instinct, therefore, is dismissal. The Dhamma is exotic, foreign, impractical — perhaps even a religion, and thus safely quarantined from relevance. The achievement subject, standing at the top of his productivity, cannot yet see that the Buddha's critique is directed precisely at that summit: the point at which the self's striving becomes its own imprisonment. His reflex is to defend what he mistakes for health. The disease denies itself.

Were he to listen a little longer, confusion would follow. The Buddha's suggestion that striving is itself the problem undermines the very axis around which the modern mind spins. "If I stop improving, won't I fall behind – won't my world fall apart?" he would ask, as if awakening were just another competitive sport. The *Eightfold Path* would look to him like a project plan; meditation, a new performance metric. He would try to achieve non-achieving, to schedule stillness between appointments. When that failed, he would conclude that the method was defective rather than his assumptions.

Only much later — perhaps in a moment of exhaustion, when the rewards of effort taste of dust — might a flicker of recognition appear. The Buddha's words, once dismissed as abstract or ascetic, would begin to sound like a description of his own interior weather. The fatigue he calls "burnout," the anxiety he calls "motivation," the loneliness he calls "independence" — all these turn out to be the modern forms of dukkha. The Dhamma starts to make sense not as morality or mysticism, but as psychology: a science of the mind's compulsions.

At that point, if he is honest, the achievement subject faces a decision. He can return to the noise and continue polishing his reflection, or he can do what the Buddha advised: pause, observe, and see the machinery of craving for himself. It is a simple

instruction, but it feels like death to the ego that thrives on motion. To stop striving is to lose the only identity one knows. Yet in that pause lies the beginning of freedom.

The Buddha's teaching does not demand belief and least of all faith; it demands attention. It invites the modern mind to turn its intelligence inward and examine the assumptions it never questions: that progress equals happiness, that control equals safety, that more is always better. To see these clearly is to understand what the Buddha thought — that liberation is not the triumph of the self but its quiet extinction, not the future perfected but the present understood.

The achievement subject will resist this, as humanity always has. But some part of him, however faint, will recognize the truth of it, because the ache of restlessness is universal. And when that recognition comes — whether by chance, by fatigue, or by grace — he will understand why, after twenty-six centuries, the Buddha's teaching still stands: because it names, with unflinching precision, the disease of every age, and because it offers, with equal simplicity, the only prescription that works — to stop running and finally see where we are.

The Answer

The answer to "What Use are the Buddha's Teachings?" depends on the one who asks. For the achievement subject—inhabitant of a world enthralled by visibility, speed, and perpetual performance—the Buddha's teachings are not an escape from modern life, but a mirror held to its exhaustion. They do not teach how to relax, but how to wake up. They are not a balm for the overworked mind, but a diagnosis of the sickness that drives it to overwork. The Buddha's Dhamma remains useful precisely because it exposes the futility of the very habits that the achievement society glorifies: the endless pursuit of self-definition, the addiction to progress, the worship of comfort disguised as wellness.

The achievement subject lives in transparency, mistaking exposure for intimacy and productivity for purpose. The Buddha's teaching cuts through that illusion. It reveals that behind all the self-curation and striving there is no solid "I" to be perfected—only processes unfolding, conditioned by causes, dissolving moment by moment. To see this is not to lose oneself, but to see that there was nothing there to defend. What the transparent society calls identity, the Buddha called delusion. What it calls optimization, he called craving. The Dhamma, therefore, is not a path to self-improvement but to the end of the self that needs improving.

In this way, the Buddha teaches us not how to achieve, but how to see. He turns the gaze back upon the one who looks, back to the restless machinery of wanting that animates every modern life. For the mind trained to measure worth by output, this is the hardest thing imaginable—to sit still and observe one's own habit – the habits of becoming – the habits of craving to become "something" or "someone." Yet this is precisely where the cure begins. The Dhamma reveals that suffering is not produced by failure, but by the ceaseless attempt to escape failure through effort. Understanding this, the mind no longer seeks relief through achievement, because it sees that the striving and craving for achievement was the symptom all along.

The usefulness of the Buddha's teaching lies in its reversal of value. Where the achievement society demands addition—more skills, more knowledge, more improvement—the Buddha prescribes subtraction. His path is the deliberate unlearning of what the modern mind mistakes for growth. When craving stops, the world does not vanish; it simply ceases to wound. The peace that follows is not the peace of comfort, but of clarity: the end of compulsion, the end of chasing.

For a civilization obsessed with being seen, the Buddha offers invisibility—not as erasure, but as freedom. Invisibility is what remains when the craving to be witnessed fades. It is the quiet dignity of existing without performance. To be invisible in this way is to reappear, finally, in one's own presence.

So, of what use are the Buddha's teachings? They are the one instruction that cannot be commodified, optimized, or streamed. They are the invitation to stop becoming what you already are not. They are the return to sanity in an age intoxicated by speed. They replace transparency with clarity, motion with stillness, achievement with understanding.

Their use lies not in making the world more bearable, but in revealing why it became unbearable to begin with. For the achievement subject, that is the only knowledge worth having. The Buddha's prescription remains what it has always been: *to see things as they are*, without the narcotic of becoming. In that seeing, the fever cools. The wheel slows. What remains is not achievement, but awakening.

WE LIVE IN THE MOST CONNECTED AGE IN HUMAN HISTORY—YET THE MIND HAS NEVER BEEN MORE DIVIDED.

Neuronal Dukkha examines the mechanisms behind this division. Drawing from the Buddha's earliest teachings and contemporary social theory, the book reveals how achievement culture, transparency culture, and digital acceleration create a new architecture of suffering.

THE MIND IS NOT BROKEN; IT IS CONDITIONED.

- Visibility erodes depth
- Performance replaces rest
- Stimulation displaces reflection
- Acceleration undermines understanding

Through rigorous examination, the book shows how these forces reshape attention, distort perception, and generate the exhaustion that defines contemporay life.

Neuronal Dukkha concludes by returning to the Buddha's method—not a belief system, but a precise dismantling of the conditions that give rise to suffering.

— Dípabhasadhamma

Endnotes

[1] **Preface**

Byung-Chul Han, The Burnout Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); and The Transparency Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

Bhikkhu Bodhi, The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984), 1–7.

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Walpola Rahula, What the Buddha Taught (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 2–3.

Romila Thapar, Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 145–150.

Steven Collins, Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 15–20.

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Rupert Gethin, The Foundations of Buddhism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 34–38.

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Introduction

[1] Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 8–12. Han introduces the concept of the "achievement subject" (Leistungssubjekt), arguing that the disappearance of external domination gives rise to self-exploitation.

[2] Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.11, *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, in Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1843–1846. The Buddha identifies craving (taṇhā) and clinging (upādāna) as central causes of dissatisfaction and continued becoming.

[3] Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2017), 22–29; and Bhikkhu Bodhi, The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994), 1–3. Han's notion of psychopolitical control parallels the Buddha's exposition of the mind enslaved by craving.

[4] Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.2, *Paticca-samuppāda-vibhaṅga Sutta*, in Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, 533–535. The Buddha describes bhava-taṇhā ("craving for becoming") as the generative link sustaining cyclic existence. Compare Han's account of existential fatigue in The Burnout Society, 25–27.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid

[7] Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2010), 596–600. The "Wheel of Becoming" (bhava-cakka) illustrates consciousness revolving through craving and becoming — the ancient analogue to the modern feedback loop of stimulation and burnout.

[8] Han, *The Burnout Society*, 3–7. Han describes the transition from an "immunological paradigm" of external enemies to a "neuronal paradigm" of internal pressure, rendering the self defenseless against its own demands.

[9] Han, *Psychopolitics*, 7–10. Han's concept of "auto-exploitation" defines neoliberal freedom as a regime in which individuals dominate themselves, blurring the line between mastery and servitude.

[10] Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*; The Transparency Society; and Psychopolitics. These works collectively underpin the analyses in Self-Domination, The Fetish of Becoming, and The Society of Fatigue, revealing the internalization of performance and visibility.

[11] Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 1–18. Han explores the disappearance of otherness and the collapse of distance in modern desire, themes central to The Disappearance of the Other and The Anguish of Eros.

[12] Byung-Chul Han, "*The Dromocracy of the Present*," in The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 1–20. Han's reflections on acceleration illuminate The Acceleration of Saṃsāra; compare Hartmut Rosa, Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity, trans. Jonathan Trejo-Mathys (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

[13] Majjhima Nikāya 10, *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, in Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 145–151; and Sayadaw U Tejaniya, Awareness Alone Is Not Enough (Yangon: Shwe Oo Min Dhamma Sukha Forest Meditation Center, 2011), 9–12. Both emphasize awareness in the midst of daily life — a theme echoed in the book's closing insight.

[14] Ibid

Chapter 1

[1] Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1947), 257.

[2] Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 7–15.

[3] *Ibid*., 8–10.

[4] Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. 1–9. Appears: "Han's transparency society, where everyone must be seen, measured, and approved…"

[5] Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2017), pp. 8–18.

[6] Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1–9.

[7] Erich Fromm, To Have or To Be? (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 85–87.

[8] Richard K. Payne, ed., *Secularizing Buddhism: New Perspectives on a Dynamic Tradition* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2021), 1–5.

[9] *Ibid*., 8–12.
[10] Majjhima Nikāya 26, *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (The Noble Search), trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi in The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009), 259–71.
[11] Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, 19–31.
[12] Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.1, *Paṭicca-Samuppāda Vagga* (The Chapter on Dependent Origination), trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi in The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, vol. 2 (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 533–34.
[13] *Ibid*
[14] Majjhima Nikāya 26, *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta*, 259–71.
[15] Majjhima Nikāya 38, *Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta* (The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving), trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi in The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, 355–64.
[16] Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, 19–31.
[17] *Ibid*., 30–33.
[18] Sayadaw U Tejaniya, *Awareness Alone Is Not Enough* (Yangon: Shwe Oo Min Dhamma Center, 2005), 17–20.
[19] *Ibid*
[20] Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Rinehart, 1955), 169–73.
[21] Sayadaw U Tejaniya, *Relax and Be Aware: Mindfulness Meditations for Clarity and Insight* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2019), 55–57.
[22] Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.100, *Sona Sutta*, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi in The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 274–75.
[23] Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1941), 139–41.
[24] *Ibid*., pp. 140–43.
[25] Majjhima Nikāya 121, *Cūḷasuññata Sutta* (The Lesser Discourse on Emptiness), trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi in The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, 967–71.
[26] *Ibid*
[27] Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, 33–36.
[28] de Lubicz, The Opening of the Way, pp. 3–7.
[29] Aṅguttara Nikāya 4.191, *Paññā Sutta* (On Wisdom), trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi in The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 593–94.
[30] Isha Schwaller de Lubicz, The Opening of the Way, 6–8.
[31] Han, The Burnout Society, pp. 33–36.

[32] *Ibid*

[33] Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, 19–21.

[34] Dīgha Nikāya 1, *Brahmajāla Sutta* (The All-Embracing Net of Views), trans. Maurice Walshe in The Long Discourses of the Buddha (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 67–85.

[35] Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 177–80.

[36] Sayadaw U Tejaniya, *Awareness Alone Is Not Enough*, 23.

[37] Han, *Psychopolitics*, pp. 19–21.

[38] Han, *The Transparency Society*, pp. 25–28.

[39] Majjhima Nikāya 26, *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta*, 259–71.

[40] Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, 45–48.

[41] Majjhima Nikāya 59, *Bahuvedanīya Sutta* (The Many Kinds of Feeling), trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi in The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, 511–14.

[42] Erich Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* 102–4.

[43] Sayadaw U Tejaniya, *Awareness Alone Is Not Enough*, 23.

Chapter 2 - Fetish of Becoming

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[2] Erich Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

[3] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), ch. 1, sec. 4, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof."

[4] Sigmund Freud, "*Fetishism*," in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927–1931), trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), 147–58.

[5] Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

[6] Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.2 (Paṭicca-samuppāda).

[7] Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), MN 11 (Cūḷasīhanāda Sutta).

[8] Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, SN 22.83 (Ānandasutta).
[9] Ashin Tejaniya (Sayadaw U Tejaniya), *Awareness Alone Is Not Enough* (Singapore: Awaken Publishing & Design, 2018).
[10] Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1941).

Chapter 3 - The Society of Fatigue

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[2] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), SN 56.11.
[3] Ibid., SN 22.59 (Anattalakkhana Sutta).
[4] Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, 19–21.
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[6] Ibid., MN 26 (Ariyapariyesanā Sutta).
[7] Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1–3.
[8] Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, SN 36.6 (Salla Sutta).
[9] Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), 34–35.
[10] Han, *Transparency Society*, ibid., 8–10.
[11] Huxley, *Brave New World*, ibid., 178; Bodhi, Connected Discourses, SN 12.63 (Paccayā Sutta).
[12] Han, *Burnout Society*, ibid., 30–31; Huxley, Brave New World, ibid., 54.
[13] Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, ibid., SN 22.59.
[14] Huxley, *Brave New World*, ibid., 172–174.
[15] Ibid., 174.
[16] Ajahn Sumedho, *Don't Take Your Life Personally* (Hemel Hempstead, UK: Amaravati Publications, 2010), 3–5.
[17] Ibid., 7.
[18] Han, *Burnout Society*, ibid., 22–23.
[19] Sumedho, *Don't Take Your Life Personally*, ibid., 12–14.
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[21] Han, *Burnout Society*, ibid., 28.
[22] Ibid., 32–33.
[23] Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *Middle Length Discourses*, ibid., Majjhima Nikāya 9.
[24] Han, *Burnout Society*, ibid., 19–21.
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Chapter 4 – Transparency

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[3] Han, *The Transparency Society*, 15.
[4] Han, ibid., 22–25.
[5] Han, ibid., 17.
[6] Han, ibid., 27.
[7] Martin Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvelous Works of Nature and Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 181–183.
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[9] Han, *The Transparency Society*, 29.
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[12] Han, *The Transparency Society*, 31.
[13] Han, ibid., 33.
[14] Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* 115.
[15] Sayadaw U Tejaniya, *Awareness Inside the Body* (Yangon: Shwe Oo Min Dhamma Center, 2003), 42.
[16] Saṃyutta Nikāya 42.11, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1360.
[17] Han, *The Transparency Society*, 37.

[18] Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* (New York: Rinehart, 1947), 145–147.
[19] Tejaniya, *Awareness Inside the Body*, 44.
[20] Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.23, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 575–576.
[21] Han, *The Transparency Society*, 40.
[22] Aṅguttara Nikāya 10.61, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 1459.
[23] Han, *The Transparency Society*, 44.
[24] Han, ibid., 46.
[25] Han, ibid., 48.
[26] Saṃyutta Nikāya 35.28 *Ādittapariyāya Sutta*, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, in The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, 1143.
[27] Han, *The Transparency Society*, 52.
[28] Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.23, in Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, 575.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* 125.
[31] Tejaniya, *Awareness Inside the Body*, 46.
[32] Han, *The Transparency Society*, 54.
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Chapter 5 - Chaos and Transparency

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[12] Han, The Transparency Society, 10.

[13] Han, The Transparency Society, 12.

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Chapter 6 - The Disappearance of Rituals

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[2] Sayadaw U Tejaniya, Awareness Alone Is Not Enough (Yangon: Shwe Oo Min Dhamma Sukha Forest Center, 2003), esp. 7–15, on mindfulness in everyday, repeated actions.

[3] Erich Fromm, The Sane Society (New York: Rinehart, 1955), 35–44, on modern man’s rootlessness and anxiety when traditional structures and rituals disappear.

[4] Han, The Disappearance of Rituals, 7–16, on the erosion of ritual form in late modernity and the dominance of digital “updates” over repeated practices.

[5] Byung-Chul Han, The Transparency Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 20–28, on the culture of immediacy, exposure, and the loss of temporal depth.

[6] Synthetic reference to the three strands already cited: Han (Disappearance of Rituals; The Transparency Society), Fromm (The Sane Society), and Tejaniya (Awareness Alone Is Not Enough).

[7] Han, The Burnout Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 17–23, on the “disciplinary society” and the older world structured by “no,” rules, and form.

[8] Ibid., 1–10, on the emergence of the “achievement society” that abandons external negativity and with it the forms that made life coherent.

[9] Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1959), 68–75, on ritual repetition as humanity's primordial way of structuring time and defending against chaos.

[10] Han, The Disappearance of Rituals, 1–4, on rituals transforming mere being-in-the-world into dwelling-in-the-world.

[11] Erich Fromm, The Sane Society, 30–38; see also The Art of Loving (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 21–28, where Fromm describes "rootedness" as a basic human need fulfilled by belonging and shared forms.

[12] Sayadaw U Tejaniya, Don't Look Down on the Defilements: They Will Laugh at You (Yangon: Shwe Oo Min Dhamma Sukha Forest Center, 2005), 12–19, on continuity of awareness and the deepening of insight through repeated, ordinary actions.

[13] James Herriot, All Creatures Great and Small (London: Michael Joseph, 1972); see also All Creatures Great and Small, BBC television series (BBC, 1978–1990) and Channel 5/PBS Masterpiece revival (2020–), which dramatize Herriot's world of rural ritual and social form.

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[18] Sayadaw U Tejaniya, Awareness Alone Is Not Enough, 18–25, on sati as receptive awareness that listens and senses tone and intention before reaction.

[19] Bhikkhu Bodhi, The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994), 59–63, on right mindfulness (sammā-sati) and the stillness that allows wise response rather than reactivity.

[20] Han, The Burnout Society, 30–37, on the erosion of shared spaces and forms of listening in the achievement society, leading to burnout and isolation.

[21] Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 176–180, on the decay of the public realm and genuine speech, and the consequent thinning of culture when dialogue collapses.

Chapter 7 – Disappearance of the Other

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[11] Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.51 (Paccayā Sutta), in Bhikkhu Bodhi, Connected Discourses, ibid.

[12] Jacques Lacan, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977).

[13] Majjhima Nikāya 1 (Mūlapariyāya Sutta) and Aṅguttara Nikāya 4.170 (Kamma Sutta), in Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009).

[14] Byung-Chul Han, The Transparency Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. 8–12. — Cited for Han’s

introduction of transparency as the dominant moral code of the achievement society and his concept of "the inferno of the same."

[15] Byung-Chul Han, The Agony of Eros, trans. Erik Butler (MIT Press, 2017), pp. 1–5. — Supports the description of the "radiant inferno" in which the self collapses inward through overexposure; Han's diagnosis of Eros' disappearance.

[16] Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.2 (Paṭiccasamuppāda Sutta), in Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), vol. 2, pp. 533–534. — Cited for the Buddha's explanation of avijjā (ignorance) as the first link in dependent origination, paralleling Han's account of delusional self-reference.

[17] Plato, Symposium, trans. Alexander Nehamas & Paul Woodruff (Hackett, 1989), pp. 210–212 (Speech of Diotima).— Provides the classical conception of Eros as striving toward the Beautiful, grounding Han's use of the term as transcendence rather than desire.

[18] Han, The Agony of Eros, ibid., pp. 25–29. — Referenced for Han's reinterpretation of Eros as the courage to encounter alterity, beyond self-referential pleasure.

[19] Majjhima Nikāya 22 (Alagaddūpama Sutta), in Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi (trans.), Middle Length Discourses (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009), pp. 227–231. — Cited for the Buddha's rejection of a permanent self (atta) and the analogy of grasping the Dhamma as one grasps a snake—illustrating liberation through non-attachment.

[20] Saṃyutta Nikāya 35.85 (Bāhiya Sutta), in Bodhi (trans.), Connected Discourses, ibid., pp. 1187–1188. — Supports the notion that liberation arises "in the seen, only the seen," echoing Han's call for encounter without appropriation.

[21] Hesiod, Theogony, trans. M. L. West (Oxford University Press, 1966), lines 116–122. — Establishes the origin of Eros in Greek cosmogony as the primal force of creation, grounding Han's reinterpretation.

[22] Byung-Chul Han, The Agony of Eros, trans. Erik Butler (MIT Press, 2017), pp. 1–4. — Source of Han's definition of Eros as "the courage to step beyond the self's enclosure."

[23] Plato, Symposium, trans. Alexander Nehamas & Paul Woodruff (Hackett, 1989), pp. 210–212 (Diotima's discourse). — Provides the "ladder of love" metaphor, describing Eros as ascent from sensual to divine contemplation.

[24] Byung-Chul Han, The Agony of Eros, trans. Daniel Steuer (MIT/Polity, 2017), 7–12. Why: supports "withering of connective force" under self-reference.

[25] Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," in Pathmarks, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge, 1998), 136–154; and Introduction to Metaphysics, trans. Gregory Fried (Yale, 2000), 124–131. Why: aletheia as unconcealment; model of conceptual recovery.

[26] Byung-Chul Han, The Transparency Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, 2015), 9–16. Why: pornography as paradigm of exposure/erasure of distance.

[27] Byung-Chul Han, The Agony of Eros, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 1–8. Cited for Han's description of Eros as the movement toward the Other—forming the conceptual basis for "listening" and transformation.

[28] Claude Debussy, Monsieur Croche et autres écrits (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 241–43; François Lesure, Debussy on Music: The Critical Writings (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 115–16. Cited for Debussy's emphasis on silence and suggestion; the works referenced embody this principle.

[29] Byung-Chul Han, The Transparency Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1–14. Cited for Han's thesis that transparency converts dwelling into display—underpinning "manufactures surfaces for seeing."

[30] Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner's, 1958), Part I. Cited for the idea of dialogue as silent reciprocity— "meeting of two silences."

[31] Byung-Chul Han, The Agony of Eros, 9–13. Cited for Han's opposition between Eros and pornographic exposure as defining cultural modes.

[32] Byung-Chul Han, The Burnout Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 7–20. Cited for the achievement-society's compulsion toward stimulation and efficiency—used here to ground the "hook" and attention-economy logic.

[33] Byung-Chul Han, The Transparency Society, 15–35. Cited for Han's critique of exposure and his account of visibility replacing repose.

[34] John Cornforth, The Country Houses of England 1948–1998 (London: Aurum, 1998), 24–29; Timothy Mowl, Capability Brown: The Shape of the Landscape (Stroud: Tempus, 2001), 76–83. Cited for the historical context of Chatsworth and Brown's design philosophy.

[35] Norman Foster, Foster Works 5 (Munich: Prestel, 2004), 146–57. Cited for Foster's own description of 30 St Mary Axe as an emblem of transparency and corporate identity.

[36] William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," in Lyrical Ballads (1798); Stephen Gill, William Wordsworth: A Life (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 160–65. Cited for the contemplative structure of the poem and its reflective cadences.

[37] Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus," in Ariel (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 14–17. Cited as an example of confessional poetics and performance as self-exposure.

[38] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A11–A16/B25–B30; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), §1–§4. Cited for philosophy as "architecture of existence."

[39] Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism Is a Humanism, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 22–28. Cited for the principle "existence precedes essence."

[40] Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 92–102. Cited for the analytic of power and identity formation.

[41] Byung-Chul Han, The Burnout Society, 1–8, 43–52. Cited for Han's analysis of exhaustion and self-optimization as cultural pathology.

[42] Erich Fromm, The Sane Society (New York: Rinehart, 1955), 117–25; The Art of Loving (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 1–32. Cited for the concept of love as disciplined communion.

[43] Byung-Chul Han, The Agony of Eros, 15–38; The Burnout Society, 47–58. Cited for the diagnosis of transparency and the loss of genuine presence.

[44] Martin Buber, I and Thou, Part I (New York: Scribner, 1958), 3–22. Cited for the dialogical relation "I–Thou."

[45] Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 50–58, 176–80. Cited for the analysis of appearance and spectacle.

[46] Albert Camus, The Rebel, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage, 1956), 13–22, 252–57. Cited for rebellion as solidarity amid absurdity.

[47] Simone Weil, Waiting for God, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 105–16. Cited for "attention" as the ethical mode of seeing.

[48] Leonard Bernstein, The Infinite Variety of Music (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966), 64–72. Cited for the orchestra as a paradigm of collective transcendence.

[49] Greg Milner, Perfecting Sound Forever: An Aural History of Recorded Music (New York: Faber and Faber, 2009), 273–82. Cited for the technological compression of attention spans in music.

[50] Aram Sinnreich, The Piracy Crusade (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 33–41. Cited for streaming and datafication of sound.

[51] Richard Taruskin, The Oxford History of Western Music, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 458–66. Cited for chamber ensemble culture.

[52] Mark J. Butler, Playing with Something That Runs (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–15. Cited for solitary producer culture and DJ composition.

[53] Mervyn Cooke, A History of Film Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 205–18. Cited for the symphonic film score as spectacle.

[54] George Steiner, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 3–10; F. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), 1–27. Cited for the "cathedrals of consciousness" analogy in classic realist literature.

[55] Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 536–44. Cited for modern narrative interiority and stylistic dissolution.

[56] Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism (New York: Routledge, 1988), 3–12. Cited for postmodern irony and metafiction.

[57] Leonard B. Meyer, Emotion and Meaning in Music (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 32–45. Cited for music as structured transcendence.

[58] Paul Bekker, "Mahler," in Essays on Music (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 187–99; Simon Trezise, ed., The Cambridge Companion to

Debussy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1–5. Cited for Mahler and Debussy as spiritual inheritors of the "Other."

[59] Alex Ross, The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 53–78, 143–58, 374–79. Cited for twentieth-century rupture in musical form (Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Cage).

[60] Byung-Chul Han, The Burnout Society, 21–29; Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 8–12. Cited for repetitive culture and the exhaustion of affect in digital capitalism.

Chapter 8 – The Anguish of Eros

[1] Byung-Chul Han, The Transparency Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 9–11. Discussion of the "achievement society" and the loss of distance.

[2] Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.11 (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta), in Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), II 1844–1847. Origin of suffering through craving.

[3] Byung-Chul Han, The Agony of Eros, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), p. 7–12.

[4] Han, The Burnout Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 17–21.

[5] Han, The Agony of Eros, p. 15–23.

[6] Erich Fromm, To Have or To Be? (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 121–124. Contrast between being and having; greatness requires distance.

[7] Han, The Burnout Society, p. 28–32.

[8] Han, The Agony of Eros, p. 30–33.

[9] Han, The Transparency Society, p. 45–49.

[10] Byung-Chul Han, Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2017), p. 57–60.

[11] Han, The Transparency Society, p. 52–53.

[12] Han, The Agony of Eros, p. 36–39.

[13] Han, The Transparency Society, p. 59–62.

[14] Han, The Agony of Eros, p. 40. Phrase "inferno of the Same."

[15] Han, The Transparency Society, p. 66–68.

[16] Han, The Agony of Eros, p. 45–48.

[17] Han, The Agony of Eros, p. 52–54. Han closes with Eros as the possibility of renewal through re-encounter with the Other.

Chapter 9 – The Acceleration of Samsara

[1] Byung-Chul Han, The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity, 2017); see also Han, The Burnout Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

[2] On taṇhā driving bhava in dependent origination, see Saṃyutta Nikāya (Saṃyutta Nikāya) 12.2 "Paccayā Sutta" (DO links: avijjā → saṅkhārā … taṇhā → upādāna → bhava).

[3] On bhava and the wheel of becoming (and the round of rebirth): SN 12 (Nidāna-Saṃyutta) passim; cf. the concept of saṃsāra-vaṭṭa in the commentarial tradition.

[4] Dhammapada 186–187 (sensual desires are not satisfied by indulgence, "even a shower of gold would not satisfy").

[5] On avijjā as fundamental ignorance: Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.1–12.2; also, Majjhima Nikāya 9 "Right View" (Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta).

[6] Han, The Burnout Society; and Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2017).

[7] Anattā: SN 22.59 "Anattalakkhana Sutta" (the five aggregates are not self; seeing thus, one turns away and is liberated).

[8] Han, The Agony of Eros, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017); Han, The Transparency Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

[9] See note 3 (bhava / wheel of becoming).

[10] Majjhima Nikāya 10 "Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta"; Saṃyutta Nikāya 47 (Satipaṭṭhāna Saṃyutta) on sati as disciplined awareness.

[11] See note 7 (anattā).

[12] Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.2 (dependent origination: avijjā → … → taṇhā → upādāna → bhava).

[13] Majjhima Nikāya 9 (right view) for the doctrinal frame (ignorance, craving, becoming).

[14] Byung-Chul Han, The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

[15] Han, The Transparency Society (visibility, positivity; loss of the negative).

[16] Vivek Bhargava and Manuel Velasquez, "The Ethics of the Attention Economy," Business Ethics Quarterly 31, no. 1 (2021): 1–26.

[17] Paul H. Vettehen et al., "An Attention-Economic Perspective on the Future of Media," *Futures* 150 (2023): 102869.

[18] See note 7 (insight into not-self as unveiling the motion's emptiness).

[19] Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.59; SN 12.20 on the sequence: seeing → nibbidā → virāga → vimutti.

[20] White Castle, "What You Crave" (long-running brand slogan; see corporate history and brand profiles).

[21] "Cinnamon Toast Crunch," slogan "Crave Those Crazy Squares" (documented brand usage).

[22] Jack in the Box, "Crave Bigger" (contemporary slogan lists/industry roundups).

[23] Dr Pepper, "The One You Crave" (brand-slogan histories/industry databases).

[24] Mary Brown's (Canada), "Crave Delicious" (brand materials/encyclopedic entries).

[25] See note 16 (attention economy ethics; compulsion by design).

[26] See note 17 (media futures; algorithmic pre-shaping of wants).

[27] Robert A. Wicklund and Peter M. Gollwitzer, *Symbolic Self-Completion* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1982).

[28] Youngjee Han, Joseph C. Nunes, and Xavier Drèze, "Signaling Status with Luxury Goods: The Role of Brand Prominence," Journal of Marketing 74, no. 4 (2010): 15–30.

[29] Rob M. A. Nelissen and Marijn H. C. Meijers, "Social Benefits of Luxury Brands as Costly Signals of Wealth and Status," Evolution and Human Behavior 32, no. 5 (2011): 343–55.

[30] Ashley N. Gearhardt et al., "Neural Response to Fast-Food Commercials in Adolescents," Appetite 147 (2020): 104546.

[31] Tara D. Masterson et al., "Brain Response to Food Brands in Children," Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience 14, no. 10 (2019): 1151–59.

[32] Minsung Yeum et al., "Differential Neural Reward Reactivity to Food Ads," Frontiers in Neuroscience 17 (2023): 1102932.
[33] See note 16.
[34] See note 17.
[35] See note 12 (bhava in DO; "motor" as interpretive gloss).
[36] See note 10 (sati restores the interval).
[37] Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.11 "Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta" (Setting in Motion the Dhamma-cakka).

[38] See note 12/3 (contrast of Dhamma-cakka and bhava-cakka within DO frame).
[39] See note 12/3 (end of becoming).
[40] See note 37 (Dhamma-cakka).
[41] Saṃyutta Nikāya 22 passim (aggregates/saṅkhāra) and SN 22.59 (no doer/anattā).
[42] Udāna 8.1 (Nibbāna Sutta); Itivuttaka 44 (the Unconditioned).
[43] See note 37.
[44] See note 12/3 (bhava-cakka driven by craving).
[45] See note 37 (Dhamma-cakka turned by insight).
[46] Majjhima Nikāya 117 "Mahācattārīsaka Sutta"; SN 45 (Magga-Saṃyutta) on vīriya (right effort).
[47] See note 6 (Burnout Society / overproduction of the self).
[48] SN 56 (Sacca-Saṃyutta; First Noble Truth).

Chapter 10 - From Burnout to Awakening

[1] On the fire going out (epigraph). Paraphrase consistent with the extinguishing simile used for nibbāna, e.g., Majjhima Nikāya 72 Aggi-Vacchagotta (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, Wisdom, 1995), and SN 43's "Nibbāna" cluster; attribution here follows Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli's rendering notes on "extinguishing."
[2] Sīla (ethical conduct). See Digha Nikāya 22 and Majjhima Nikāya 41 for the role of virtue in the path; concise summary across the Path factors at SN 45.
[3] Sati (mindfulness). Majjhima Nikāya 10 Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta; also Digha Nikāya 22 Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna (if you prefer the longer form).

[4] Upādāna (clinging). Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.2 (Paccayā Sutta) / DO formula across Saṃyutta Nikāya 12: clinging → becoming.

[5] Impermanence & suffering from grasping. Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.59 (Anatta-Lakkhaṇa) and Saṃyutta Nikāya 22 aggregates generally.

[6] Han — achievement subject / 'You can.' Byung-Chul Han, The Burnout Society (2015, Stanford UP), ch. 1–2.

[7] Han — disappearance of the Other / transparency. Byung-Chul Han, The Transparency Society (2015, Stanford UP) and The Agony of Eros (2017, MIT/Polity).

[8] Dukkha, taṇhā, bhava; 'upādāna-paccayā bhavo'. SN 56.11 (Dhammacakkappavattana) for the structure of dukkha/taṇhā; SN 12.2 for "clinging → becoming."

[9] Six years of austerities. MN 36 Mahāsaccaka Sutta (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995).

[10] Awakening under the tree. Majjhima Nikāya 26 Ariyapariyesanā Sutta; also, SN 12.65 for liberation theme.

[11] Middle Way. SN 56.11 (the Buddha's first discourse) introducing Majjhimā Paṭipadā.

[12] Han — 'positivity'/weariness of positivity. Han, The Burnout Society, and The Transparency Society (positivity society critique).

[13] Nibbidā (disenchantment). SN 12.23 Upanisa Sutta (sequence: faith → joy → … → disenchantment → dispassion → liberation).

[14] Mindfulness as liberation practice. MN 10, SN 47 Satipaṭṭhāna cluster.

[15] Nibbāna as 'extinguishing' / fire-without-fuel simile. Majjhima Nikāya 72, SN 43; also, Udāna 8.1–3 for nibbāna statements (unborn, etc.).

[16] Kalyāṇa-mitta (noble friendship). SN 45.2 Upaddha Sutta ("the whole of the holy life").

[17] Han — achievement society; exploiter/exploited unity. Han, The Burnout Society, ch. 1.

[18] Taṇhā → upādāna → bhava (DO links). Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.2; also, Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.1–12 passim.

[19] Yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana. Frequent; e.g., Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.23, Majjhima Nikāya 38 (Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya).

[20] Bhāvanā as cultivation (meeting the Other). Aṅguttara Nikāya 4.41 (Ven. Ānanda on bhāvanā), AN 2.31–32; usage across Nikāyas.

[21] Bhāvanā from root bhū (to be/become) — cultivation. Pāli usage standard; see Aṅguttara Nikāya 4.41; etymology per PTS Pāli Dictionary (bhāvanā < bhū + ana).

[22] Distinguishing bhava vs. bhāvanā; bhava-nirodha. SN 12 cycle; cessation links in Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.2/ Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.68; doctrinal contrast standard in commentarial/Abhidhamma discussions.

[23] Right View—contact → feeling → craving → clinging → becoming. SN 12 (phassa-paccayā vedanā…); also, Majjhima Nikāya 9 Sammādiṭṭhi for Right View.

[24] Right Intention (renunciation, goodwill, harmlessness). Majjhima Nikāya 117 Mahācattārīsaka Sutta.

[25] Sīla as stabilizer. Majjhima Nikāya 41, Digha Nikāya 22; precepts' role across Aṅguttara Nikāya 8.39.

[26] Indriya-saṃvara / Bāhiya instruction. Udāna 1.10 (Bāhiya Sutta).

[27] Satipaṭṭhāna (four establishments). Majjhima Nikāya 10 / Digha Nikāya 22.

[28] Right Effort (four tasks). Saṃyutta Nikāya 45.8 (or Aṅguttara Nikāya 4.14).

[29] Jhāna (four absorptions) and role for insight. Standard formula in Digha Nikāya 2 Sāmaññaphala, Majjhima Nikāya 39, Majjhima Nikāya 119.

[30] Paññā: three marks (anicca, dukkha, anattā). Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.59; also, Dhammapada 277–279.

[31] Brahmavihāra sources. Aṅguttara Nikāya 4.125; also, Saṃyutta Nikāya 42.8 and Digha Nikāya 13; you already mention Saṃyutta Nikāya 1.8 (mettā).

[32] Four Noble Truths as diagnostic. Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.11.

[33] "Fires of craving, aversion, delusion go out…" Fire simile per MN 72; three fires as classic defilements (see Saṃyutta Nikāya 35.28 Ādittapariyāya Sutta: "All is burning").

[34] Four Sights / renunciation background. Sutta hints in Majjhima Nikāya 26, Majjhima Nikāya 36; full narrative in later sources (e.g., Buddhacarita), but you can anchor to Majjhima Nikāya 26 for canonical grounding.

[35] Han terminology in the vignette (achievement/ transparency / opacity). Han, The Burnout Society; The Transparency Society; The Agony of Eros.

Chapter 11 - Naming the Nameless

[1] Byung-Chul Han, The Transparency Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), esp. 1–9 on transparency and positivity, and 45–52 on labeling and control.

[2] Richard Gombrich, What the Buddha Thought (London: Equinox, 2009), 1–6, 47–51, on the Buddha's use of "Dhamma" and the absence of a self-designation like "Buddhism" in the early sources.

[3] Tomoko Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 120–57; David L. McMahan, The Making of Buddhist Modernism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3–12, on nineteenth-century constructions of "Buddhism" as a world religion.

[4] Richard Gombrich, Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 15–30; Patrick Olivelle, The Early Upaniṣads: Annotated Text and Translation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3–13, on Brahmanical ritual authority and social hierarchy.

[5] Byung-Chul Han, The Burnout Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1–16; Han, The Transparency Society, 7–15, on modern psychopolitics and interiorization of control.

[6] Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.2 (Paccaya Sutta) and related discourses on dependent origination and nāma-rūpa, in Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 533–41.

[7] Han, The Burnout Society, 8–18, on the "achievement-subject" (Leistungssubjekt) and the compulsion to self-optimize.

[8] Majjhima Nikāya 18 (Madhupiṇḍika Sutta), in Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya, 2nd ed. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 204–10, on perception, papañca, and conflict.

[9] Han, The Burnout Society, 19–33, on self-exploitation, internalized compulsion, and the psychodynamics of burnout.

[10] Han, The Transparency Society, 17–29, on visibility, exhibition, and the erosion of depth and privacy

[11] Gombrich, What the Buddha Thought, 33–64, esp. 52–64, on reading the Buddha contextually, his rhetorical strategies, and the primacy of method over metaphysics.

[12] Han, The Transparency Society, 31–44, on the smoothing-out of alterity and the elimination of opacity.

[13] Byung-Chul Han, The Agony of Eros, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), esp. 1–24, on the disappearance of the Other; see also Han, The Transparency Society, 31–36.

[14] Majjhima Nikāya 22 (Alagaddūpama Sutta), in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, 227–37, for the simile of the raft and the warning against clinging even to the Dhamma.

[15] Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.59 (Anattalakkhana Sutta), in Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 901–4, on the non-self characteristic of the aggregates.

[16] Byung-Chul Han, The Burnout Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 36–50, on the shift from prohibition/discipline societies to achievement-oriented "yes-societies."

[17] Richard K. Payne, ed., Secularizing Buddhism: New Perspectives on a Dynamic Tradition (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), esp. introduction, 1–25, on secular discourse and inner management.

[18] Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.65 (Kālāma Sutta), in Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 280–83.

[19] Majjhima Nikāya 72 (Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta), in Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya, 2nd ed. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 588–93.

[20] Itivuttaka 90, in John D. Ireland, trans., The Udāna and the Itivuttaka: Two Classics from the Pali Canon (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1997), 199–200.

[21] On the Buddha's pragmatic use of language and rejection of essentialist views: Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., The Middle

Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), MN 58, MN 95.

[22] On the nineteenth-century construction of "Buddhism" as a world religion: David L. McMahan, The Making of Buddhist Modernism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 33–61; Tomoko Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 121–164.

[23] Byung-Chul Han, The Transparency Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1–17.

[24] Han, The Burnout Society, 23–39, on visibility, performance, and the internalization of achievement logic.

[25] Han, The Transparency Society, 18–31.

[26] Han, The Burnout Society, 31–57, on the achievement-subject as self-project.

[27] On the opacity of seemingly transparent concepts, see Han, The Transparency Society, 45–58.

[28] Han, The Burnout Society, 59–74, on mindfulness, optimization, and spiritualized self-production in late modernity.

[29] Majjhima Nikāya 22 (Alagaddūpama Sutta), in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, Middle Length Discourses, 227–235.

[30] On bhava-taṇhā and identity-formation: Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.2, SN 12.20, in Bhikkhu Bodhi, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 533–537.

[31] Han, The Transparency Society, 52–73; Han, The Burnout Society, 45–67.

[32] On the Buddha's analysis of clinging to views, names, and identity: MN 44, MN 148; SN 22.89; see Bodhi, Connected Discourses, 901–905.

[33] Han, The Transparency Society, 6–13.

[34] On the Buddha's teaching that Dhamma is a "way of seeing," not an identity: AN 3.65 (Kālāma Sutta); AN 6.63; MN 24 (Rathavinīta Sutta).

[35] David L. McMahan, The Making of Buddhist Modernism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3–5, 89–137; Donald S. Lopez Jr., The Story of Buddhism: A Concise Guide to Its History and Teachings (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 3–34, on the prominence of Mahāyāna and Tibetan forms in modern global imagination.

[36] Rupert Gethin, The Foundations of Buddhism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 60–96, on early Buddhist analysis of suffering

and rejection of speculative metaphysics; see also MN 26, SN 56.11 in Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000).

[37] Paul Williams, Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), 1–32; Donald S. Lopez Jr., Buddhist Art and Architecture (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), on Mahāyāna imagery and narrative.

[38] Byung-Chul Han, The Transparency Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 18–31.

[39] McMahan, The Making of Buddhist Modernism, 6–7, 89–137, on the gap between "Buddhism" as a modern construct and early Buddhist teaching.

[40] Gethin, Foundations of Buddhism, 59–65, on the Buddha's teaching as a path of practice and insight rather than doctrine; SN 56.11 (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta) and MN 26 (Ariyapariyesanā Sutta) in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, Middle Length Discourses.

[41] Han, The Burnout Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 31–57; Han, The Transparency Society, 45–58.

[42] Williams, Mahayana Buddhism, 33–78; Damien Keown, Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 80–104, on Mahāyāna ethical, artistic, and philosophical developments.

[43] McMahan, The Making of Buddhist Modernism, 33–61; Tomoko Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 121–164, on colonial classification and romantic orientalism; Han, The Transparency Society, 6–13, on visibility culture.

[44] Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed., In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 3–18; Bhikkhu Anālayo, A Comparative Study of the Majjhima-Nikāya (Taipei: Dharma Drum Publishing, 2011), vol. 1, 1–23, on the coherence and centrality of the Nikāyas/Āgamas as witnesses to the early teaching.

[45] Han, The Transparency Society, 45–58, on "noise," visibility, and the erosion of depth.

[46] Han, Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Power, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2017), 1–24, on the self as the new site of quasi-religious investment and control.

[47] Han, The Transparency Society, 18–31; The Burnout Society, 45–67, on the demand for authenticity and continuous self-display.

[48] Ann Gleig, American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 1–25, 147–181; McMahan, Making of Buddhist Modernism, 180–210, on Western, post-Christian Buddhist identities and their moral self-understandings.

[49] Gethin, Foundations of Buddhism, 1–7, 112–142, on common modern perceptions of Theravāda; Gleig, American Dharma, 87–116, on tensions between "traditional" Theravāda and Western convert expectations.

Chapter 12 – Of What Use Are the Buddha's Teachings?

[1] Socrates epigraph. The saying "*Beware the barrenness of a busy life*" is widely attributed to Socrates in popular media, but careful philological work shows it does not appear in any ancient source and likely originates in modern Christian devotional literature. See Peter Gainsford, "*Fake quotations*," Kiwi Hellenist blog, 2018, which traces the phrase to a 1902 Christian Missionary Review aphorism and discusses its later misattribution to Socrates.

[2] Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 3–5. Modern explanations of the origins of religion. The summary that religion arose as an attempt to explain natural events and manage anxiety reflects a standard line in the anthropology and cognitive science of religion. Pascal Boyer argues that religious concepts emerge as "inference-rich" explanations for otherwise puzzling phenomena, while also responding to existential concerns. See Pascal Boyer, Religion Explained: *The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), esp. chs. 1–3.

[3] Byung-Chul Han, The Burnout Society, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 8–16. Achievement society" and the analysis of the subject driven by internalized productivity imperatives derive from Byung-Chul Han's work, especially The Burnout Society and The Transparency Society, which also develop his critique of

transparency and self-exploitation. Reason: Attributes the conceptual frame used for “Han’s achievement society.

[4] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1900–1902 (SN 38.1–2, discussion of the “extinguishing” of the fires).

In early Buddhist texts, nibbāna literally means “extinguishing” or “quenching” and is glossed as the extinguishing of the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion (and of craving more generally) that maintain suffering. Supports the doctrinal description of nibbāna as “the extinguishing of the fires that cause dissatisfaction and suffering.”

[5] Aldous Huxley, Brave New World (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), 207. The phrase and the concept of Soma as “Christianity without tears” come from Aldous Huxley’s 1932 novel Brave New World, where Soma functions as a state-sanctioned drug providing painless consolation and preventing dissatisfaction. Documents the literary source behind the Soma metaphor and the quoted phrase.

[6] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1843–1845 (SN 56.11, Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta). The Second Noble Truth identifies taṇhā—craving for sensual pleasure, for existence, and for non-existence—as the origin of dukkha, most famously in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11) and parallel formulations. Underpins the link between modern avoidance of feeling and the classical concept of taṇhā.

[7] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1843–1845 (Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.11, Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta). Taṇhā (craving) as the origin of suffering. Upādāna (clinging) as refined attachment, including to comfort. Upādāna, “clinging” or “grasping,” is a key factor in dependent origination, following craving and preceding becoming; it includes clinging to sensual pleasure,

views, rites and rituals, and self-theories. Supports the identification of attachment to comfort as a form of upādāna.

[8] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 901–903 (SN 22.59, Anattalakkhana Sutta, sequence: seeing → nibbidā → virāga → vimutti). Nibbidā (disenchantment) as a stage toward liberation. Many discourses present a sequence in which insight into the nature of phenomena leads to nibbidā (disenchantment), then virāga (fading of passion), and finally liberation (vimutti), e.g., in SN 22.59 (the Anattalakkhana Sutta). Reason: Grounds the claim that Soma-like comfort blocks the very disenchantment needed for awakening.

[9] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1843–1845 (SN 56.11). The First Noble Truth expressed as "This is suffering." Classical presentations of the Four Noble Truths use the formula "This is suffering; this is the origin of suffering; this is the cessation of suffering; this is the path…" (e.g., SN 56.11). Supports the phrasing that "This is suffering" cannot penetrate a culture insulated by soft positivity.

[10] Richard F. Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (London: Equinox, 2009), 1–5; 133–138. Richard Gombrich on the Buddha as methodological innovator. In What the Buddha Thought, Richard Gombrich portrays the Buddha as an extraordinarily original thinker whose teachings are better understood as a method of understanding experience rather than a fixed doctrinal system. Backs the characterization of the Buddha's teaching as "a method" that challenged prevailing metaphysics.

[11] Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 7–10, 150–155. Christopher Hitchens and the domestication of prophets. The idea that societies "domesticate" or neutralize their prophetic critics recurs in Christopher Hitchens' work (for example, in God Is Not Great and essays on religious figures), where he describes how institutions tame radical figures after their deaths. Supports the paraphrased observation that "every age domesticates its prophets."

[12] Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 145–155 (MN 10, Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta). Sati (awareness) as basic "noticing." In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and related discourses, sati is presented as sustained, non-

reactive awareness of body, feelings, mind, and phenomena, often translated as "mindfulness" or "awareness." Underwrites the statement that the Buddha called simple, non-preferential noticing sati, awareness, and places it as the foundational practice.

[13] Richard F. Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (London: Equinox, 2009), esp. ch. 1. Supports the claim that many modern readers assume the Buddha's thought is philosophically complex and difficult, and reflects Gombrich's framing of the Buddha as a sophisticated but often misunderstood thinker.

[14] Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), e.g., MN 9 (Right View); and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), e.g., SN 45.1–2. Grounds the use of avijjā (ignorance) as a technical term denoting a fundamental cognitive-moral blindness, not mere lack of information.

[15] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), e.g., AN 3.69; and Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 68–72. Supports the statement that the suffering mind is structured by enduring forces of craving, aversion, and ignorance—the classical "three unwholesome roots"—across time and culture.

[16] Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), esp. chs. 1–2. Backs the contrast between the Buddha's fifth-century BCE Ganges-valley context and modern India shaped by colonialism and globalization.

[17] Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), DN 5 (Kūṭadanta Sutta). Supports the claim that the Buddha critiqued Brahminical sacrifice and the idea of purification by ritual, a pattern structurally similar to later creedal or transactional religion.

[18] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.1–2 (Nidāna-Saṃyutta, Dependent Origination). Establishes avijjā as the first link in the chain of dependent origination, framing ignorance as an active, structural condition at the root of saṃsāra.

[19] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), SN 22.87 ("He who sees the Dhamma sees me; he who sees me sees the Dhamma"). Provides the canonical source for the quotation "He who sees the Dhamma sees me," used to argue that the true teacher points away from personality toward the teaching itself.

[20] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), SN 56.11 (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta). Supports the assertion that the Buddha's first discourse begins with the diagnosis of dukkha and proceeds through cause and cessation— "diagnosis" rather than instant consolation.

[21] Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 39–47. Backs the claim that early Buddhist chanting and simple ritual forms functioned primarily to preserve and transmit the teaching orally, not to create a mood or aesthetic environment.

[22] Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 497–502 (MN 47, Vīmaṃsaka Sutta). Supports the statement that in the Vīmaṃsaka Sutta the Buddha explicitly invites his followers to investigate him and not accept his authority uncritically.

[23] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 1188–1190 (e.g., AN 8.53 and related passages outlining criteria that the Dhamma leads to dispassion, cessation, and peace). Grounds the claim that genuine Dhamma is defined by its tendency toward virāga (dispassion), nirodha (cessation), and upasama (peace).

[24] Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 781–790 (MN 95, Cankī Sutta). Backs the description of the Cankī Sutta as a discourse where the Buddha analyzes the bases of belief and warns that tradition, faith, and reasoning do not by themselves guarantee truth.

[25] Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 625–632 (MN 76, Sandaka Sutta). Supports the portrayal of "uninspired wanderers" who deny causality and liberation, and whose teachings the Buddha characterizes as ultimately fruitless.

[26] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 280–284 (AN 3.65, Kālāma Sutta). Provides the canonical source for the instruction to test teachings by their consequences—"when you know for yourselves…"— rather than by authority or tradition.

[27] Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 231–277 (DN 16, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta). Supports the statement that the Buddha foresaw misrepresentation of his teaching and urged disciples to dwell with themselves and the Dhamma as island and refuge.

[28] Acharya Buddharakkhita, trans., *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985), 49 (Dhp 61); cf. 231 (Dhp 329). Grounds the quote "If you find no companion on the path, go alone" in the Dhammapada verses that advise going alone rather than in bad company.

[29] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1643–1645 (SN 47.13, "Be an Island unto Yourselves"); and Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 268–272 (DN 16). Supports the phrase "Be a lamp unto yourselves" as part of the Buddha's final instruction emphasizing self-reliant mindfulness and the Dhamma as refuge.

[30] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1843–1845 (SN 56.11, Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta). Backs the claim that the Buddha's first discourse begins with the diagnosis of dukkha and proceeds through cause and cessation, framing the path as clinical insight rather than instant comfort.

[31] Richard F. Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (London: Equinox, 2009), 1–5, 133–138. Supports the portrayal of the Buddha as a radical thinker who worked within the conceptual framework of his age to transform it, a central thesis of Gombrich's book.

[32] Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), 16–34. Provides historical backing for the description of Brahminism as the overarching religious–social system of the Buddha's culture, regulating rank, purity, and destiny.

[33] Richard F. Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (London: Equinox, 2009), 69–101. Supports the analysis of how the Buddha reinterpreted Brahmin concepts—sacrifice, purity, rebirth, karma—turning them from ritual-metaphysical ideas into psychological and ethical ones.

[34] K.R. Norman, trans., *The Group of Discourses* (Sutta-Nipāta), 2nd ed. (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2001), 109–115 (Sn 3.9 Vāseṭṭha Sutta); and Acharya Buddharakkhita, trans., *The Dhammapada* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985), 113–123 (Dhp 383–423, "Brāhmaṇa Vagga"). Grounds the redefinition of the true "Brahmin" as one who has destroyed greed, hatred, and delusion rather than one of high birth, which underlies the claim that liberation cannot be granted by status, only realized through understanding.